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The Birth of a Nation: Identity Formation in Exodus 1-15

by

Carla Leanne Smithson

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

in

Comparative Literature - Religious Studies

Department of Modern Languages and Comparative Studies

Edmonton, Alberta
Spring 1996

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Dr. E Ben Zvi

Dr. U Margolin

Dr. M Bortolussi

Dr. N Pylypiuk

OCT 26, 1995

I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a child."

But the Lord said to me,

"Do not say, 'I am only a child';

for you shall go to all to whom I send you,

and you shall speak whatever I command you."

Jeremiah 1:6-7

Abstract

The story of the Exodus appears repeatedly throughout the Hebrew Bible -- always as a foundational element in Israelite national identity. This study examines how the narrative portrays the process of Israelite identity-formation, and the possible reception of the text by the ancient Israelites in terms of reader-text interaction.

Part one focuses on the first six chapters of Exodus, dealing first with the image of the Hebrews as slaves, including development through parallels with the life of Moses, and then with the narrative presentation of God. Although the underlying view of Israel as God's chosen is present in the text, it is countered by the reality of oppression, in which the Israelites define themselves in terms of Egypt.

Part two examines the movement of the Hebrews from their oppressed mindset to an identity intertwined with YHWH. The conclusion is that, while Exodus was written to present the original birth of the nation, it also functioned to generate the identity of the people as they read it.

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I would have had great difficulty plotting my way through the whole process of writing this without the input of several people. Foremost in my mind is my God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Any insights are His, and any erring is mine. I am also grateful to Dr. Ehud Ben Zvi for his patience in guiding me through the mass of scholarship in the area, and for his mixture of encouragement and criticism through the last year; and, to Dr. Uri Margolin, for his input and his perspective, which always led me back to the literary aspect of the work. Finally, of course, a great deal of credit belongs to my parents, who never let me be afraid to think or act.

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Introduction

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exod. 20:2; Deut 5:6). This declaration rings out from the beginning of the Decalogue, establishing the significance of the Exodus event in chapters 1-15 for the identity of the Israelite nation. It is in these chapters that Israel, a *people*, first appears in the Pentateuch, and here also that YHWH first enters into a relationship with the Hebrews. The elements of this narrative shape the foundation of the Israelite nation and its world view.

My study of these chapters will focus upon two crucial questions. The first is, how does the narrative portray the process of Israelite identity-formation? In this context, I will examine the movement (stages, decisive factors, etc.) of the Hebrews in the narrative as they progress towards a new self-image. The second question involves the reception of the text: what identity-forming impact could this narrative have on various groups or collectives of readers, or, how does the text interact with its readers? This aspect of my study steps outside the narrative to examine the impact that *Exodus* as a text would have on the identity of a reader in the 'real world'.

Like any other narrative, Exodus 1-15 can be examined with respect to both its actual author (his sources, models, date, historical situation, intended readership, communicative intent...) and to the textually inscribed narrator's voice or speech position, including also the narrated agents, whether they are individuals or a collective, human or divine. Although these factors are universal, each text is in a different specific situation, and so raises its own issues. These components are the background of my study, and a

glance at the possible data for the author and at the theory of textual dynamics will serve well as an introduction to *Exodus*.

0.1 The Author, but not Necessarily an Author

One of the difficulties in studying *Exodus* is our lack of information about the basic area of textual production in the ancient world. A greater part of our knowledge of the relevant literary mechanisms (writing, circulation, literacy, cultural borrowing and similar issues) is hypothetical, with little chance of discovering solid evidence. To even try and develop a theory of ancient literature, scholars must imaginatively displace themselves to the world before the printing press, 'art for art's sake', the round earth -- or even Plato.[1] The uncertainties that enwrap Biblical literature have produced a large variety of suggestions about the form, genre and nature of the Exodus text. I will deal with some of the questions (and answers) generated by pertinent studies as I progress through my close reading of Exodus 1-15. For now, here is a brief summary of a few of these positions.

The idea that Biblical literature originated in folktale tradition (oral or written) has been popular in twentieth century scholarship, generating an assortment of related theories. These views base the Exodus narratives in folkloric stories, sagas or epics in which Moses is the focal point, or hero of the tale. The narrative as it now stands is,

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[1] Extensive work has been done in researching the 'Old Testament World'. Some useful studies include R.E. Clements, ed., *The World of Ancient Israel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Neils Peter Lemche, *The Canaanites and Their Land* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991) and *Early Israel* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985); and Thomas L. Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People From the Written and Archaeological Sources* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1992). Nahum Sarna, *Exodus = Shemot* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), also provides some perspective.

according to these studies, the literary rendition of the popular tradition. In its several versions, the oral hypothesis postulates one or more cycles of Moses stories[2], or the combination of a cycle centered on Moses with other tales, such as the mighty acts of God.[3] The difficulty with this approach is the lack of real evidence -- especially if the traditions are considered to be oral. Identifying folkloric structures in the text is useful in structural analysis, but whether the patterns are the literary device of an author or evidence of a genuine folkloric history of the text remains unclear.

Another major view taken by scholars is that *Exodus* is a work of 'historiography'.[4] A writer of historiography unites a variety of sources to form a 'historical' work,[5] comparable to the work of Herodotus.[6] The difference between this

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[2] Cf. H. Gunkel, *Das Märchen des Alten Testament* (1921; Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1987); Gerhard Von Rad, trans. E.W. Trueman Dicken, *The Problem of the Hexateuch* (1958; London: SCM Press, 1984) 50-54; and Rolf Rendtorff, trans. John J. Scullion, *The Problem of the Process of Transmission in the Pentateuch* (1977; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990). Rendtorff gives a summary of Von Rad's and Noth's theory before presenting his own schema of the development from small units to larger ones, and finally the end product (190). An example of a study of folktale structure can be found in Kenneth Jaeger, "The Initiatory Trial Theme of the Hero in Hebrew Bible Narrative," diss., U of Denver, 1992. He describes a thematic unit of heroic story, the initiatory trial theme of the hero, which covers the first fourteen chapters of *Exodus*. It is a complete segment, which could be potentially joined to other sections to make a larger folklore.

[3] George W. Coats, *Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), makes this combination. He also specifically labels the Moses stories as Saga (see also Coats, *Saga, Legend, Fable, Tale: Narrative Forms in Old Testament Literature*. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985). He defines saga, limiting it to certain parameters as a particular prose genre for his discussion. In the development of his ideas, he also gives a brief overview of folk hero research. (*Moses* 36-42).

[4] Literary scholars may give additional labels to the work, but also tend to dissociate it from its context. Their studies, certainly important, focus more upon literary devices and will be taken up below. A general introduction to this type of scholarship is Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1987).

[5] John Van Seters, *The Life of Moses: The Yahwist as Historian in Exodus-Numbers* (Louisville: John Knox, 1994). Cf. David Damrosch, *The Narrative Covenant: Transformations of Genre in the Growth of Biblical Literature* (Alabama: U of Alabama Press, 1986).

kind of writing and a historical text in the modern sense is immediately apparent: the historiographer is concerned with language, the story and its 'point', and the reader's involvement; the modern historian deals with the accuracy of facts (often at the expense of literary merit). Historiography does not discount the possibility of oral traditions, but the development of the text by the author precludes any hope of recovering them.

Either of these views has repercussions for the interaction of the text with the ancient reader. Folkloric roots would entail a common knowledge of the underlying content, and probably also associations with further traditions not recorded and so lost to us.[7] Making a written record of folktales may have been prompted by an agenda of preserving the 'purity' of the stories in the face of cultural mixing, or it may indicate a rise in literacy or a popularity of the study of folktales among an elite group.[8] Similarly, a work of historiography could have been written to assert national identity, or revive an identity lost through neglect or defeat, perhaps again as part of a political agenda.[9] Any of these may have been ample motivation to write *Exodus*.

As for the historical situation or composition of Exodus 1-15, I will follow a late dating of the narrative, noting other possibilities as occasion demands. The main part of

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[6] Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1992) 37-42, presents this view and a criticism of it. Although he has some objections to specific comparisons, stressing the uniqueness of the Hebrew text, he seems to conclude that it may indeed be called historiographical.

[7] E.g. Deborah's tradition (Gen. 35:8).

[8] Cf. Blenkinsopp 233-242, for a number of suggestions vis-à-vis the final form.

[9] Cf. Thompson, *Early History* 412-423.

the narrative will be viewed as composed during the exile (BC 586-538), with supplements by "P" completing the present text after the return to the land.[10] In addition, I will also support the view that, as far as we can apprise the concept of genre in the ancient world, the narrative is 'historiographical', although some comparisons and alternate views will be used to enrich the reading and more fully understand the text.

The writer of the first layer of *Exodus*, then, is probably familiar with the literature of Babylon, as well as the writings of the other cultures brought together in the mix of peoples during the extensive Babylonian resettlements (again, potential influences will be mentioned when pertinent). His[11] intention in composing the work is to reassert the identity of the nation, especially important for the generation of Israelites who have been born outside Judah. The readers, or audience, have settled into life in Babylon[12], and are in danger of assimilating completely. They require traditions which can be preserved without a central place of worship and without priests; the ceremonies in the "J" level tend toward this type of situation.

The supplements to the initial narrative crystallize the structure, enforcing or creating patterns (as in the plagues), adding to the law and traditions and generally turning

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[10] This is the model Van Seters uses in *Moses* (2: 457-68). The part he calls "Yahwistic" dates from the exile (according to the model), while the Priestly supplements are from a time after the return. Blenkinsopp agrees with this general dating for the final edition of the text (51).

[11] I will use a masculine singular pronoun in referring to the writer, because scribal work was male-dominated, and for easier reading than some of the non-gender-specific terms. Likewise, I will use 'He' for God, which agrees with the terminology of the text itself. For the sake on consistency within the paper, I will also refer to the narrator as 'he', although in the text it is gender neutral (at least outwardly).

[12] This is recommended by Jeremiah (29:5-7) and supported by Ezra 1:5, in which not all the exiles return. The bitterness of the exile as portrayed in Ps. 137 and Lamentations is at times also countermanded by the wealth of the returning exiles (Neh. 5).

the revolutionary shading of the narrative into one that is more useful in establishing a society.[13] This turn of text certainly suits a post-exilic writer. He would appear to have a political agenda of ensuring that the exodus would be historicized, rather than be viewed as an event which would encourage rebellion against oppression.[14] The intended readers, then, would be citizens of a nation trying to re-establish itself, regaining its identity. The question of what they are familiar with is difficult to answer. Would folklore have survived intact the events of the previous century? How much non-Israelite story and ideology were present -- and did it become part of the story, or was it suppressed? These questions and more spring up, but the answers are opaque. I suppose that the reader or the audience was familiar with *Deuteronomy*, the Deuteronomistic History, some of the Prophetic writing (parts of *Isaiah*, *Ezekiel* and *Jeremiah*, and perhaps others), and other parts of the Pentateuch, but whether this was actually the case, or how well they knew these other writings, cannot be decided in the absence of solid evidence.[15]

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[13] Neils Peter Lemche, *The Canaanites and Their Land* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991), includes a section discussing 'place' and 'anti-place' tendencies in texts. From his description, the P supplements to the Exodus story, with the more crystallized structure they establish (e.g. in the plagues) and the added rituals which make the text a 'holier' document, orient it much more to a place. The J narrative is more fluid, with a greater sense of the 'promise unfulfilled' and less emphasis upon the arrival in the land. These qualities may also factor in a consideration of the history of the text.

[14] Graeme Lang, "Oppression and Revolt in Ancient Palestine: The Evidence in Jewish Literature from the Prophets to Josephus," *Sociological Analysis* 49 (1989): 325-42, suggests that a political agenda during the time of writing is the reason that Jewish literature focuses upon God's action rather than the people's (i.e. the ruling class would not allow literature that could prompt the lower classes to revolt).

[15] In the text as it stands right now, there is a hierarchy of narratives, all moving within the basic pattern of lack - quest - fulfillment. Moses' birth story, or the scene of Moses by the well, are minute incidents of this structure within the larger pattern of Moses' life, which in turn fits within the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, itself a part of the bigger picture of covenant fulfillment. And then the bigger pattern repeats itself in the story of the nation as told in the Biblical text. This seems to point to a concept of the whole within the smaller segments at a fairly early stage of the text.

0.2 Components in the Text

More certain than issues of authorship are the components of the narrator and the characters. The characters and their actions are the substance of the narration. They are revealed through various literary devices, including 'type-scenes', repetition, dialogue and interior views.[16] The interactions of the characters (both human and divine) with one another are the basis of action in the text. Sternberg describes the basic dynamics of Biblical narrative as a movement from ignorance to knowledge for the characters and, through them, for the readers:

> Different characters attain to knowledge by different routes..., or at different places..., or to different degrees...Some (like Joseph) seek knowledge, others (like his brothers) have it forced on them, others still (like Jacob) abruptly gain or stumble on it. And the perspectival picture takes on even greater intricacy owing to the simultaneous yet independent movement of the reader along his own obstacle course.[17]

It is the narrator who mediates between the reader and the characters. The common consensus among scholars is that the narrators in Biblical literature are neutral.[18] This means that the narrators do not take sides in disputes, or make moral declarations upon the action of the characters. While it is true that judgment of events is reserved, and opinions are rarely expressed, the narrator still affects the text by the choice of materials

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[16] Cf. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) and Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).

[17] Sternberg 176.

[18] Lyle Eslinger, "Freedom or Knowledge: Perspective and Purpose in the Exodus Narrative," *JSOT* 52 (1991): 43-60, portrays a narrator with a specific agenda, whose language is rife with implications, and yet makes the assertion that the narrator is neutral.

the author has him reveal.[19] Perhaps the most important aspect of this is the focusing of the narrative through the point of view of one or another of the characters (or parties) to the exclusion of the others. By privileging one narrative agent through greater portions of the dialog, interior views and following the action of the specific agent -- showing the events from that character's perspective -- the narrator effects a focalization of the text through that character. While the overarching point of view is that of the narrator, he presents the views of the character by shifting the focus between them. In this way, the reader also shifts, being drawn by the devices of the narrator into the process of moving from ignorance to knowledge.

It is movement which is crucial in the development of Israelite national identity through Exodus 1-15. The content of the narrative is one of movement: out of Egypt (and then to the desert and, ultimately, Canaan), out of slavery to YHWH's salvation -- and to the covenant later in the book. This particular progression is set apart from the general movement from ignorance to knowledge in the Hebrew Bible since it is the foundational one for the nation, the archetype for all the others (in the final form of the text). In examining the text, I will begin with a close reading of chapters 1-6, which establishes the initial situation of the need for knowledge: who are the people who must

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[19] Sternberg discusses the techniques of narration in-depth in *Poetics*. He examines the operation of the narrator as omniscient, the modes of discourse of the narrator, the problem of the character of God (how does one portray YHWH?), and the play between reading positions (reader-elevating, character-elevating and evenhanded). These topics are hardly new to literary study, but Sternberg gives a detailed application of them to Biblical narrative. Cesare Segre, *An Introduction to the Analysis of the Literary Text* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), is a good reference for general principles of literary communication.. Additional texts are Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays by Northrop Frye* (New York: Athenäum, 1969), and Jason P. Rosenblatt and Joseph C. Sitterson, Jr., eds., *"Not in Heaven": Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991).

be transformed, and who is God? It is the plague narratives and the event at the Red Sea (7-14), the second segment I will examine, which constitute the movement toward knowledge on three levels -- geographical, sociological/psychological and national definition in terms of YHWH. The movement of both the narrated Israelites and the readers through these stages will be discussed. The close reading will thus confront most closely the question of how the Exodus narrative works as to "mark it as the first and initiatory step in Israel's history, constituting Israel as a nation, which was formed and brought out of Egypt by God."[20]

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[20] Thomas L. Thompson, *The Origin Tradition of Ancient Israel: I. The Literary Formation of Genesis and Exodus* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987) 178.

Part I: Knowledge

Who are the Israelites? The first step in examining national identity formation in *Exodus* is to consider the characterization of the group at the outset of the narrative. This involves the image and action of the Hebrews in Egypt, as well as the insights that are provided in the stories of Moses, who becomes representative of the group. A second question is equally important to the study: who is God? God's action and self-revelation in *Exodus* are a key component in the Hebrew Bible. His role in this narrative and the Israelite attitudes and responses to YHWH are an integral part of the process of nation-forming.

My reading of the first six chapters forks into a double analysis along the paths of the two questions above. For each of the questions, "Who are the people?" and "Who is God?" I will survey the entire section, studying most closely those passages which are essential for understanding these identities, and laying a foundation for the examination of the movement and change which follow in part two.

1. Who are the People?

1.1 Before Moses

1.1.1 *Under Oppression.* The Israelites are introduced as a family: the sons of Israel. This implies close ties to *Genesis* and the Joseph narratives.[1] The twelve sons of Jacob are

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[1] In the present form of the Pentateuch, *Exodus* is the sequel to *Genesis*. However, the strength of the ties between the books has been a subject of debate. The Documentary Hypothesis (in its various forms) postulated several 'strands' of narrative which more or less extended through the whole Old Testament and were joined by a series of redactors later. In this scenario, *Genesis* may or may not have been connected to *Exodus*, depending on the source and theoretician.

listed briefly, and the total number of people is given: seventy. Cassuto points out that at this point Israel is simply a man and his sons (arranged according to their mothers), seventy being the perfect number for a family.[2] The list is personal, and the generation that passes can be called by name.[3]

The generation that came from Canaan dies (1:6). This separates the family who has seen the land of the covenant from a new generation, which knows only Egypt and which *fills the land*, meaning Egypt. Effectively, the entire narrative situation has changed. Linked though it may be to *Genesis*, *Exodus* is concerned with a people, not patriarchs, and is situated entirely outside the promised land. The

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More recently, Rendtorff, Coats and others have argued, following Noth, that until the final knitting together of large blocks of narrative (at a late stage) the Pentateuchal narratives existed independently of each other. In this view, the patriarchal narratives had nothing to do with the Moses narratives or the primordial history -- or any of the segments to any other (Rendtorff, *Transmission*). In its present form, the Pentateuch certainly joins these blocks (assuming they existed) through theme, motif, and even similar narrative events. Whoever was the editor appears to have engaged in what van Seters calls ancient historiography. In this process, the writer selectively uses the material available to him ("history", chronicle, myth, folktale -- the list is long, as are the discussions of what each of these terms represents) as well as his own creativity to produce an extended historiographical work: an ideological history (see further John Van Seters, *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis* (Louisville: John Knox, 1992) and Van Seters, *Moses*). Terence E. Fretheim, "The Reclamation of Creation: Redemption and Law in Exodus," *Interpretation* 41 (1991): 354-65, examines thematic continuities between *Genesis* and Exodus, although from a more theological viewpoint.

I see no great incompatibility between these ideas. Certainly, Rendtorff's 'blocks' could have existed, and been used by van Seter's 'historiographer' (although Van Seters would dispute the existence of some of these 'blocks'). In the end product, these narratives are certainly bound together, and have been so probably from at least the exile on.

For a more extended summary of scholarship, see Blenkinsopp 1-30.

[2] Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1987) 8.

[3] The assignment of these first three verses to the latest redactor/editor has been nearly unanimous among scholars, irrespective of their other differences. If this is indeed the case, it certainly fits in with the other efforts of P to solidify and crystallize the structure of the narrative: here we have an enumeration to reinforce a tie to *Genesis*, and a symbolic number to reduce any flexibility in the story of the whole by increasing the 'holiness' of the text.

'toledoth' story cycle of the ancestor[4] is left behind structurally as the narrative becomes much more history-oriented: it deals with the interactions of communities rather than the life stories of individual men. Further, it becomes the story of a nation which is 'filling' the wrong land.

The Israelites multiply rapidly, and the vocabulary used in 1:7 to describe their increase is shaded with double meaning. It first seems to be linked to the blessings on the patriarchs: "The multiplication theme suggests the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that he would become 'a great and powerful nation' (גוי גדול ועצום) Gen. 18:18."[5] Renita Weems notes that "their religious identity is distinguished by their proliferation."[6] One particular word choice of the narrator in describing the increase in population is unusual. The verb שרצ refers almost always to animals, and even when used for people carries the connotation of the English translation 'swarm, teem'[7]. The nearest use of the verb occurs in 8:3 (ET 7:28) where it refers to the plague of the frogs. The children of Israel are thus linked to animals, and to a sign for (or even a

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[4] Blenkinsopp 58-108, has a discussion of the 'toledoth' structure, as well as noting its incompatibility with the Exodus narrative (135).

[5] Blenkinsopp 20; see also Eslinger 53.

[6] Renita Weems, "The Hebrew Women are Not Like the Egyptian Women: The Ideology of Race, Gender and Sexual Reproduction in *Exodus* 1," *Semeia* 59 (1992): 28.

[7] Cf. Gen. 7:21 and 8:17; Ezek. 47:9; and Ps. 105:30 for the use of this verb exclusively for animals. Gen. 9:7 uses שרצ in reference to mankind, but this is also a later text ("P"). This root as a noun appears in Gen. 1:20-21 and 7:21, both in reference to animal. Lev. 5:2, 22:5 and chapter 11 -- as well as Deut. 14:19 -- are more specific to crawling insects and reptiles, for the purpose of labeling them unclean.

curse on) the Egyptians. This connection highlights a duality in the description. On one side is Israelite pride in the proliferation of their race, a sign of blessing. For a member of the Hebrew group, growing quickly is cause for celebration. In Egyptian eyes, however, the group of foreigners increasing like animals is more ominous. This begins the transition to the state of oppression. As Weems states, "While their religious identity is distinguished by their proliferation, their social and political status deteriorates."[8]

The first seven verses have been brief and summary in nature, with a focus upon the sons/people of Israel. The focalization of the narrative shifts at 1:8 to the Egyptians and, specifically, Pharaoh.[9] There are three main signals of this change. First, a "new king comes to power" in Egypt. The narrator turns from a direct view of the Israelites and brings to the forefront the political situation in the Egyptian empire. Next, this new king does not know about Joseph. Whatever has already been said, or implied, in the text about who the Hebrews are (i.e. descendants of Abraham and blessed by God) is pushed to the back for the moment. Finally, הִנֵּה at the beginning of Pharaoh's speech is an indicator in Hebrew Biblical literature that the story is

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[8] Weems 28.

[9] An important aspect to note about focalization in the Hebrew Bible is that there are never more than two characters (meaning either individuals or groups -- 'speaking entities', if you will) interacting at a time. The focalization must be upon one of these two, and shifts according to whichever the narrator privileges through description, interior revelation, or even simply a greater portion of the narrative in the particular incident.

'zooming in' to view the events through a specific character's eyes.[10] The narrator focuses upon one thing: what does this new Pharaoh see?

"Look!" says Pharaoh to his people, "Here is a powerful group of foreigners among us!" (1:9). Not only do the Israelites stand out, but they are *too* numerous. Van Seters notes that "the same terminology...can be used to express a military threat" in *Deuteronomy* (7:1; 9:1; 11:23), used specifically there in relation to the original inhabitants of Canaan.[11] In addition, these people have suddenly appeared -- "Look!". As the first verses (1:1-7) unfolded, a tension was generated between the length of time described (long enough for a generation to pass and the people to multiply) and the narrative pace (only a few verses). This sense of rapid change now serves as a device to help generate the emotion of Pharaoh, taken aback by the rapid Israelite expansion. These words (1:9), coming from the character of Pharaoh, indicate a feeling of real threat to him on the level of national identity, and this is based upon the increase in Israelite population: the blessing is upon the foreigner, not the native.

Pharaoh's response is to 'deal shrewdly' with the Israelites. The justification of this is ostensibly to keep them from growing even more. However, the actual response, in 1:11, of oppressing the Israelites with forced labour, is difficult to reconcile with population control. Commentators have long puzzled over the

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[10] Cf. Adele Berlin, *Poetics and the Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982) 62.

[11] Van Seters, *Moses* 21. It is important to recognize that Van Seters' textual theory places the Deuteronomic compositions before the 'Yahwist' one historically, so a direct reference is possible in his view.

connection.[12] Perhaps the issue present at this first stage is less one of sheer numbers or population control and more one of power. When the Hebrews are free, they show evidence of the support of a deity (through the increase in population), they are able to communicate with enemies and they can more effectively rise up.[13] As slaves with taskmasters, their movement will be restricted and hopefully their spirit of rebellion (as perceived by Pharaoh) will be broken. The Egyptians hope to nullify the possible results of the Israelite population increase -- or even turn it to their use -- and so Egypt is positioned against the God of Israel.

In this way, the Egyptians and the Hebrews enter the relationship of oppressor and oppressed. Israel becomes to Egypt a lesser form of humanity, and the people are worked in menial labour -- which results in a greater rate of increase for the Hebrew population. This apparent contradiction (remembering that the measures were supposed to slow procreation) brings the Egyptians to the point of dreading the Israelites. Enslavement had reduced the people to a lower level than the Egyptians. Even worse from an Egyptian perspective, the fertility that could have been taken as a sign of blessing from a deity, is now perhaps a sign of the animal-like nature of these people who teem more and more despite everything.[14] Verse 12 certainly builds up

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[12] Brevard S. Childs, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster, 1974) 15-16. Generally, the scholarly response is to wonder, "Did the Egyptians hope to use the Israelites so harshly that they would be too tired to procreate?" The other alternative given, as always, is that this is a case of poor source splicing.

[13] The translation of 1:10 וְעָלָה is unsure. Many English versions state, "leave the country", although the more ambiguous "rise up from the land" is more accurate. The phrase could mean "to rise up and overthrow the Pharaoh" or "rise up and leave Egypt".

[14] This description is a subtle presentation of the power relations of oppression. When one examines the research into the relations of oppression in imperialism in the twentieth century, surprising

this sense of horror felt by the Egyptians. Usually considered late additions, verses 13 and 14 serve to intensify the situation, and the repetition of בְּפָרֶךְ emphasizes the inhuman treatment of the Israelites by the Egyptians as a result of this dread.

The oppression initiates the action of the plot. Pharaoh and the Egyptians have stepped into the role of opposition to YHWH. As God's blessing continues for the Israelites, the Egyptians view the increase as a threat (and not without reason). They align themselves against God because of their fear of Israel.

In the development of the Israelite identity in the text, the primary premise laid down in these first verses is that of *difference*. "At the heart of his [Pharaoh's] and the Egyptians' dread of the people of Israel is their fundamental assumption that Egyptians and Hebrews were different."[15] The basis for the narrative line (i.e. rescue from

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similarities are displayed in the psychology of oppressed/oppressor relations in the modern world, and the depiction in *Exodus*.

To briefly summarize one example, the Israelites of *Exodus* are easily examined through Albert Memmi's "Portrait of the Colonized" in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (London: Earthscan, 1990). Specifically, the mythic portrait of the colonized (by the colonizer) is present here. To justify his position, the colonizer characterizes the subordinated people negatively. Memmi cites specifically "laziness" as a common trait assigned to the colonized. Interestingly, this is the very accusation thrown out to the Israelite foremen by Pharaoh in 5:17. Now, while this characterization is used by the colonizer, Memmi points out that the colonized adopts it, beginning to believe it and live it. Notice that in the episode of "Bricks Without Straw", the foremen do not "rise up from the land" but rather turn on their own leaders, Moses and Aaron -- echoing another of the traits usually assigned by the colonizer: the inability to govern themselves. Additional research could be done with Memmi, including a consideration of the "Nero Complex" in relation to Pharaoh's decree of genocide, and also with Franz Fanon, *Black Skin/White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, (1952; New York: Grove Press, 1967). The realistic presence of these relations in *Exodus* goes far to explain the appeal it has had for oppressed peoples through the centuries.

The implications of this could be that some traces of the Egyptian oppression were preserved in the Exodus tradition passed from generation to generation. Perhaps more likely is that a stamp of the Exile experience is seen here (possibly Ps. 137 declares the same sentiments from around the same time period), or a close observation of an oppressed people. In any case, the presentation is masterful.

[15] Weems 28.

oppression) is laid in a straight-forward manner, but the ideological foundation (i.e. that the Israelites are different -- that they have an identity) is revealed ironically. The roles of superior and inferior in 7-14 are polarized contrary to the narrative's initial assumptions. The second half of chapter one (15-22), the story of the midwives, reinforces the principle of difference, but undermines and again reverses the nature of the distinction.

1.1.2 *The Midwives.* Two questions immediately confront discussions of the midwives' story. The first is simply that there are only two midwives for what has been described so far in the narrative as a very large population. Many explanations have been given. Childs suggests that these were merely the two overseers of a whole group of midwives.[16] Another suggestion is that the names listed for these women have merely symbolic value, meaning perhaps Beauty and Glittering or Brilliant, and are not meant to designate particular people.[17] Alternatively, Van Seters' view is that the author may have been working with the 'abandoned hero' motif in ancient near eastern folklore as he moved toward the birth story of Moses. This motif may be summarized as: "a king who is threatened by the birth of a rival and who schemes with the midwife (or midwives) to remove this threat but is foiled by their allowing the child to live. That

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[16] Childs 16.

[17] Cassuto 13. There has been some discussion concerning the meaning of the phrase "*mildot haivrot*" (1:15). It could designate 'Hebrew midwives' or 'midwives of the Hebrews' (who could be Egyptian). The fact that they are given Hebrew names, that Hebrews are the only ones named and that they are described as "fearing God" (1:17) places them on the Hebrew side of the polarity narratologically

child is subsequently exposed and then raised by someone unknown to the king within his own household and is his ultimate undoing."[18] In this way, the midwives' story was intended as a part of a 'Moses saga' and questions about the number of women involved to control a whole population are void: the midwives were meant only as a way to prevent the birth of the hero. Any of these are valid explanations and all may certainly have a part in enriching the narrative on different levels. Narratologically, the nature of the episode and the themes it advances require the presence of individual actors. It would not work to put the level of interaction -- irony and double meaning (see below) -- that occurs in these verses in terms of large groups. While folktales, symbolism or hierarchy may be important on some levels, the episode as a whole is developed in a specific ideological direction through individuals.

The second textual question involves Pharaoh's instigation of genocide: why would a ruler apparently try to eliminate his work force?[19] The answer to this may lie in the conceptions of male and female in the ancient world. In her study of the midwives' story, Renita Weems writes:

> He [Pharaoh] assumes that the births of male and female children have some profoundly different social and political implications. That is, male children pose a more dire physical threat to the empire than do female children. Their threat is presumably twofold: from a military and political standpoint, they can collude with Egypt's enemies and join in a battle against Egypt (1:10); and from a biological point of view, male children beget more male children. Women, on the other hand, are assumed to pose no

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[18] Van Seters, *Moses* 29. For a brief listing of a variety of such folkloric tales, see Lord Raglan, *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama*, (London: Watts, 1904) 177-189. He includes Moses in his list.

[19] Again, one could investigate further the studies of oppressive relationships, especially the "Nero complex" described by Memmi ("Portrait of the Colonizer" in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*).

> threat to national security; after all, the female midwives are conscripted into this national campaign and are sure to be, or so the Pharaoh assumes, compliant.[20]

So then, not only is there a distinction between the Egyptians (masters) and the Hebrews (slaves), but also between men (aggressive) and women (compliant). Although the men may have had a greater role in the type of work ordered by Pharaoh -- brickmaking and hard labour -- they also entailed greater risks. The women, however, besides potentially also doing heavy work, could also have been forced into domestic labour, and even more so without men and families of their own to distract them. The danger of depleting the work force could be averted by, to draw an analogy from herd management, 'changing bulls'. Sons begotten of Egyptian fathers would be less likely to "rise up from the land." In this way, labour can be controlled, and the uses for the Hebrews, specifically the women, more diversified.

This image of the Israelites is hardly the main point of the episode. The focus of the narrative is upon the Hebrews again, and Pharaoh's narrow view serves to generate irony. The first reversal is that the women do not fall in line with Pharaoh's order. In fact, until the figure of Moses takes over the narrative, women are the only ones portrayed as actually resisting the oppression, from the midwives to Moses' mother to the daughter of Pharaoh himself.[21] The upset of the gender assumptions,

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[20] Weems 29.

[21] Further examinations of gender roles in the Hebrew Bible are found in Peggy Day, ed., *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989); and in Cheryl Exum's work (including an article on this passage, "'You Shall Let Every Daughter Live': A Study of Exodus 1:8-2:10," *Semeia* 28:63-82).

however, is only a prelude to the second reversal. When the midwives are questioned about the obvious lack of results, they belie the premise that the Israelites are inherently inferior to the Egyptians.

The reply the midwives give to Pharaoh's questioning can be read with a double meaning. It has the appearance of a 'hand-waving' argument, beginning in a choppy manner with כִּי ("because"), then a rapid "not like the Egyptian women, the Hebrew women" -- and then another כִּי. The rest of the explanation follows in a rush. The midwives emphasize first Pharaoh's own thoughts, that there is a difference between Israelites and Egyptians. This described difference, that the Hebrew women are חָיוֹת, 'vigorous', creates a double meaning. It is the only occurrence of this word in the Hebrew Bible; חַיּוֹת, however, is a common word, meaning female animal. This plays upon Pharaoh's dread of the 'Hebrews-who-are-like-animals'. For the Israelites, however, this can hold an entirely positive shading, that the women are full of life, and so blessed by God. The women's double-talk, despite the illogic of the Hebrew women birthing more quickly, convinces Pharaoh, showing him to be blinded and inferior to the Israelites.

This second part of chapter one has extended the image of the Israelites from the beginning. Again, the separation of the people of Israel from the people of Egypt is central. Weem's conclusion is that, "The narrator does not challenge the fundamental premise that Hebrews are different from Egyptians, the narrator simply exploits difference by insisting that the Hebrews are not the ones who are inferior, but

are in fact superior to the Egyptians."[22] While this is obvious in this section, an important aspect to note is that the focus here has been upon the Israelites, and even more specifically, upon two exceptional individuals within the Israelite group. While Pharaoh can be construed as representative of the people of Egypt as a whole[23], the midwives tend to stand apart from the people in general, both because they are given names and because they receive a special blessing from God. The ancient Israelite readers would certainly have cheered for the midwives; in the narrative they may serve especially as a contrast to the rest of the Israelite group. This is further developed in the episode of 'Bricks Without Straw' (5:1-21) to which I will refer later. For now, the main point that the Hebrews are different from the Egyptians is established, while the superiority of the Israelites over the Egyptians is still a matter of potential: they are still, after all, a sorely oppressed people.

1.2 The People Through Moses

It is at this stage of the narrative that Moses enters the history of Israel, and he will overshadow the rest of the Pentateuch. A brief look at the technique by which the story of Israel is told in the Hebrew Bible reveals that it is dominated by the careers of

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[22] Weems 32.

[23] Pharaoh is the ruler and he is also unnamed. The position of power combined with anonymity increase his representative nature. In addition, the Egyptians act in accord with his will, both in the forced labour (1:11-14) and in the genocide (1:27 -- that this was obeyed is implicit in the story of Moses' birth).

great men.[24] The reason for this may be found in the dynamics of the communicative process. In order for a text to have an active part in the real life of a nation (which, as history indicates, is the case with the Hebrew scriptures) the readers/hearers must "live" the text. In her article "Identifying Subjects", Mary Wiseman states that "understanding stories requires the imaginative identification with their characters *because* of the connection between interpretations of characters and conceptions of the self."[25] She goes on to say, "Characters are all and only what people may *imagine* themselves to be, and people may *conceive* of their identity in all and only the ways in which they individuate character."[26] In order for the narrative to influence the identity of the people who receive it, it must provide material for the reader to interact with imaginatively. The material required for understanding is individual character. Thus, the reader must identify with an individual in a group to understand the group in a way which affects his conception of himself. The individual character becomes representative of the group. When this principle is combined with the wealth of stories that focus on individuals in the history of Israel, it produces a solid basis for examining a specific character to learn about the Israelites as a group.

Does this apply to Moses, and how would it affect the way the text was read? I have already postulated that the midwives may not be completely representative of

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[24] The history of Israel moves through the stories of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, and David, with a host of less prominent figures filling in the gaps.

[25] Mary Wiseman, "V. Identifying Subjects," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 19 (1982): 342.

[26] Wiseman 348.

the people because they are named and appear to be exceptional individuals who are especially blessed. Both of these criteria for non-representation also apply to Moses. Yet, I have also stated that the midwives may portray the *potential* of the Israelites. Moses is equally a figure who demonstrates the potential of the people. This can perhaps best be seen in the parallels between Moses' life and the history of the people. His birthstory passes him through the Nile in a basket of reeds. This relates both to the deaths of the Hebrew babies and to the crossing of the Red (reed -- the same word is used both for the reeds of the basket and the name of the sea) Sea by the Israelites just as their nation is born. Just as Moses spends many years tending sheep in the wilderness before God can commission him (Exod. 2:23), so the Israelites wander in the desert forty years before they can begin to conquer the land. Moses' life[27] is threatened by the Lord just as he embarks to deliver the people. He is rescued by the circumcision blood of his firstborn, just as the Israelites are rescued by the blood of the Passover, which is also tied to circumcision by the rituals instated (12:44,48). These are only cursory examples of the ties between the story and the history. Moses exhibits the possibilities for development of identity and faith for the Israelites in the future [28], and likewise, the first phase of his life (i.e. his birth, his flight to Midian, and his call) reveals the state of the Israelites under oppression. There exists, then, a

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[27] Or, at least, someone's life is threatened. See the discussion of this episode below (54-56)

[28] Consider in this respect Exod. 14:13-14; 19:6; Num. 11:29.

typological parallelism between the life career of Moses, the individual, and the story of Israel, the group.

At the outset of the story of Moses' life, a tension exists between his status as a hero, the chosen one of God, and the mistakes, rejection and insecurity experienced by the man. The birth story begins to establish his position as leader: it is the pattern for a folkloric hero. The subsequent events (chp. 2) reveal the positive traits in Moses' character which qualify him to deliver the people, but it is also a series of events in which he is rejected and displaced. The Call Narrative draws these two together, as the man, in his weakness, is confronted with the purposes of God. This process, and the specifics unveiled through it, is the subject of the detailed examination I will now begin, starting with the Birth Story.

1.2.1 *Early Life* To some extent, the narrative of the first chapter has simply set up the situation of oppression, and the story of salvation begins in earnest with the birth of Moses. Three levels are important to consider in Exodus 2:1-10: (1) its relation to the Birth Story in the ancient near east and in folklore in general, (2) its features as a piece of Biblical narrative; and (3) its position in the Exodus story and contributions to the present study.

It is folkloric aspects and comparisons with the Sargon legend which occupy most recent close studies of Moses' birth. The story of Sargon of Akkad was discovered on a stele.[29] It speaks in an autobiographical voice, telling the story of the

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[29] Cf. J.B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955) 119.

reign of the famous king. The interesting part for Biblical scholars is especially the account of his birth. His parents are unnamed, and his birth is a secret. Set adrift upon the Euphrates in a rush basket, Sargon is rescued by a 'drawer of water' and becomes a gardener in Akkad until Ishtar grants her love to him and he becomes king.[30] This story is obviously quite similar to the account given of Moses' birth, and most questions revolve around what kind of access the writer of *Exodus* had to this story, and when.

In fact, both texts appear based upon strong folkloric patterns, which are not surprising to find in the stories of great leaders. The observation that folk or fairy tales are structured according to a limited number of schema has been a fact of scholarship for many years. These patterns often find their way into the literature of a culture. The reason why these patterns are evident in *Exodus* is more significant than the fact that they are present. A brief look at how folktale structure is manifest in the narrative will help clarify the discussion.

Folktale patterns have been extensively studied in past years. Many classification methods have been tried, and most were discarded because of their complexity. It was Vladimir Propp who set the standard for folktale studies with his *Morphology of a Folktale*, a study of the basic plot functions in Russian fairy tales. This kind of analysis has since become a standard model for the analysis of folktales,

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[30] Coats uses this inscription to justify his contention that the birth story is less concerned with the birth than Moses' adoption into the Egyptian court, as well as to prove the heroic nature of the Moses stories (*Moses* 44-48).

even to the point where it is stretched beyond its legitimate usage. To use Propp's work seriously in Biblical studies, scholars must first establish a Biblical set of recurrent or basic motifs. Work has been done in this area over the past years, and the set of 18 motifs developed by Kenneth Jaeger after a study of various Biblical heroes, as well as Gilgamesh, seems a good model to use.

Jaeger studies what he labels 'The Initiatory Trial Theme of the Hero in Hebrew Biblical Narrative'. This theme progresses through the various narratives according to a standard set of motifs, all of which do not necessarily appear for each hero, and some of which may be repeated (as in Propp's model).[31] The place of the birth story in the schema is my present concern. The first motif, the Statement of the Problem, occurs initially in 1:8-22 (appearing twice more, in 2:23-25 and 3:7-10). The birth story embodies the second motif, the Genealogical Identification of the Hero. Most noticeable here is that the birth scene is neither the only, nor the primary occurrence of the motif (cf. 6:14-27), and similar repetition is also true for many other motifs which follow through the narrative. The probable explanation for the complexity is the literary nature of the story: it is not a 'pure' folktale, nor is it intended to be.

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[31] The entire list of Jaeger's motifs is as follows: (1) Problem; (2) Genealogical Identification of the Hero; (3) Distinguishing Characteristics of Hero; (4) Heroes' Humble Background; (5) Divine Initiation of Heroic Trial; (6) Suggestion of Inadequacy; (7) Sign(s) of Confirmation; (8) Companion Assigned; (9) Elder Kin Uninformed; (10) Journey to Conflict Arena; (11) Counselor Encountered; (12) Assembly of Israelites; (13) Hero Encounters Opponent(s); (14) Verbal Jousting; (15) Heroic Action or Victory Surprises Israelites; (16) Unusual Tool or Weapon Used; (17) Conflict -- Victory -- Rout; (18) Denouement. The story of Moses contains all 18 motifs (191-94). In fact, the Moses narrative tends to be the most folkloric Biblical story across a number of studies (cf. Raglan).

Because folktale structure is present in *Exodus*, the reason for the writer's use of it, and its intended effect in the narrative, is important to consider. Folktale patterns are common throughout the world, and narratives based upon them appeal strongly to the population in which they originate. It is through folklore -- or mythography -- that world view and social structure is ingrained in a group. When a writer structures his history employing echoes of such patterns, he appeals to the level of world view in the listeners, in this case the ideological makeup of the ancient listeners which has been produced by the mythological structures in their society. Moses becomes the 'Hero', an instant establishment of status. The 'rightness' of his leadership later in the story has already begun to develop. Added to this is the similarity to the story of Sargon, assuming that it was at least somewhat well known. Moses could only increase in stature by equation with the legendary king.[32]

These observations bring us to the limit of what can be accomplished through folklore analysis on literary level. As Milne writes concerning Propp's theory, "The model is limited to certain features at that level [narrative surface structure], namely, functions and roles."[33] The birth story is just one motif in the trial theme, advancing the whole and establishing Moses as hero and (future) leader.

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[32] Some further comparisons are made by Van Seters, *Moses* 24-29. Note also that matters of how a narrator structures his work and the allusions he chooses to make often have little to do with questions of the historical validity of the work and more with his rhetoric of persuasion.

[33] Pamela J. Milne, "Folktales and Fairy Tales: An Evaluation of Two Proppian Analyses of Biblical Narratives," *JSOT* 34 (1986): 38. For more studies on folklore in Biblical narrative, cf. Susan Niditch, ed., *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990).

Van Seters notes some other aspects of the birth story related more to Biblical narrative in general than to folklore. The first few verses, 2:1-2, read "like the typical beginning of an account of an important person's career."[34] However, the characters are anonymous: the parents are unnamed and "for the father to be without a minimal genealogy is unprecedented."[35] The child himself is unnamed until the end of the story. Given the situation portrayed in the narrative -- hiding a child from killers -- anonymity increases the sense of danger and secrecy. Furthermore, the sequence of verbs in the first verses seems to be modeled upon, not other birth stories, but a passage in Hosea.[36] A link, then, is made already to the prophetic role Moses will later play. Van Seters also points out, "the one who is rescued is always the one who overcomes the person responsible for the threat."[37] In this way, the narrative plays upon the style of Biblical narrative to increase tension and to foreshadow coming action.

Finally, the birth story is important for the themes which continue to be developed from chapter one.[38] The questions of difference surface again, especially regarding the role of women. Not only does another Hebrew woman join the 'resistance', but Pharaoh's own daughter acts willfully against her father's order.

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[34] Van Seters, *Moses* 25.

[35] Van Seters, *Moses* 26.

[36] Van Seters, *Moses* 27.

[37] Van Seters, *Moses* 28.

[38] Some scholars claim that the episodes of the midwives and the birth have only a shallow connection. For a discussion of this, see again Van Seters, *Moses* 24-29.

Further, the Israelite boy is raised in the court itself. Does this narrative mean to break down the distinctions of male/female and Egyptian/Israelite through the unity of the women? Although some such implications can be drawn[39], they are never developed further in the narrative. For this reason, I suggest that the purpose of the reversals is to extend the farce begun, at the expense of Pharaoh, in 1:19. Not only is his power undermined by the Israelites, it is undermined in his own home.

The next incidents in the story of Moses, 2:11-22, serve mainly to reveal his character, and to move him into the desert in Midian. The focus of the narrator is now upon Moses, and the narrative jumps forward to his adult life. The revelation of character begins.

The first thing of importance to national identity is the sense of unity of Moses with "his own people" (2:11).[40] These words are in the mouth of the narrator, but Moses does not question the link further on in the text. This is especially apparent in the call narrative, where God speaks of Himself in terms of the Israelites and Moses has no problem understanding. Ultimately, however, the idea that Moses had a sense of identification with the Hebrews is an argument from silence, one that the narrative never bothers considering. So, then, assuming that he does feel a connection to the enslaved people, his Israelite 'nationalism' could be attributed either to his early years

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[39] These implications prompted Harold Bloom, *The Book of J* (New York, 1990), to suggest that the writer is a woman. More likely, the narrative is a reflection of gender relations in the ancient near east. In Biblical narrative, women are often introduced for practical purposes and then just disappear.

[40] Sometimes the first thing noted is that the same verb is used in verse 10 for *grew older* and verse 11 for *grown up*. On the basis of these usages, a source division is postulated. Again, Van Seters has a good discussion of this in *Moses* (30).

with his mother or to the Egyptian princess' sympathies, both present in the story, or, speculatively, to an attitude of prejudice against him in the palace. Nothing is said in the narrative in explanation: it is simply right that the deliverer *knows* his own people. Moses' knowledge goes beyond acknowledgment and is proven by his actions.[41] The second part of the murder-story, however, points out that the people do not know him, and actually reject him as leader.[42]

This rejection and subsequent betrayal to Pharaoh moves directly into the scene at the well, without even a sentence break. Here, again, Moses demonstrates his sense of justice and willingness to act courageously by driving away the offending shepherds. Added to this is a concern for others: he waters the flocks for the women. A significant change has also occurred: rather than being contrasted to the Egyptians, he is mistaken for one. The text never says that he tells Jethro that he is an Israelite, so perhaps he takes up a new identity for himself here.[43]

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[41] It is ironic that the man through whom the law is revealed begins his career as a killer and an outlaw. There is some speculation that it is because of his blood-guilt that Moses is attacked at the lodging-place (4:24-26). See below (W.H. Propp).

[42] The narrator does not allow an absolute polarization of the people to come through the depiction: it is the man who is *in the wrong* who rejects Moses.

[43] This would also contribute to Jaeger's motif 9, Elder Kin Uninformed. These episodes have certainly fulfilled motif 3, Distinguishing Characteristics of Hero (96). The well scene is also discussed as a Biblical *type-scene* by Robert Alter in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 56-58. He defines a type-scene as a narrative episode which recurs in the lives of various characters in Biblical narrative, which reveals, through variations, important aspects of the character (51). Alter's approach views the same phenomena as Jaeger's' folktale study, but turns the repeated scene into a literary device (which *functions* in the same way as a motif, but supports a different theory of textual production). Additionally, Alter relates aspects of this scene, like fighting in the desert and drawing water, to later incidents in the story of Moses and the Israelites, increasing the parallels between the individual story and the group history.

Moses' movement away from Egypt can be viewed as a *type* of, or parallel to, Israel's eventual exodus, making him again representative of the people. This displacement into the wilderness is also important to bring him more closely to the image of the oppressed Israelites.[44] It removes him from the privileged position he held in Egypt. When Pharaoh tries to kill Moses (the adopted grandson of the king) for the death of a taskmaster (far below Moses in authority) Moses' actual lack of power is evident. He is as politically disenfranchised as the Israelites were after the death of Joseph. He sees himself as an alien[45], and he works for the profit of his father-in-law. He is not as oppressed as the other Israelites, but the relative change in situation is as great. Now he truly gains a knowledge of his people.

The narrative's focus dramatically changes for three verses (2:23-25) at this point. The narrator returns to Egypt and the nation of Israel. While all these events have occurred in the life of Moses, the people are left trapped in the house of bondage. It is apparent that no real movement has occurred as far as the history of the nation is concerned -- and *that* is the overarching concern of *Exodus*. There is one final factor, one character, which must yet be introduced before the action can begin: God, who has been barely mentioned in the introduction. I will return to a discussion of the image of God later. For now, it is enough to note in this passage that the people are

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[44] The reversals of purposes in leaving Egypt are apparent: Moses goes to Midian oppressed and becomes more so; the Israelites are freed and go to Midian to meet with God.

[45] This is stated explicitly in the text through the name of Moses' son, Gershom, in 2:22.

expressing a lack, or, in folkloric terms, the *problem* motif has been explicitly stated by the narrator.[46]

1.2.2 *Call and Beyond* The 'call-narrative' in Exodus 3-4 is one of the most discussed passages of the Old Testament. Much energy has been expended upon dividing these two chapters into sources, based upon repetitions and the variation in the name of God.[47] This second criterion, though, has been severely criticized by most recent studies, as the very content of the section plays upon God's names, and so nullifies such critical activity.[48] As for repetition, a survey of the work of Van Seters, Jaeger and Coats will show that it serves literary functions rather than simply pointing to source splicing

Van Seters assigns the entire call narrative (except 4:17) to his Yahwist. This writer -- or historiographer -- was active during or shortly after the exile. He used material written by the Deuteronomist, which included *Deuteronomy* and the History, as well as the writings of several of the Prophets and other sources from the ancient world. From whatever was available, he selected forms and content as he wove together a 'historiographical' introduction to DtrH. In the call narrative specifically,

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[46] Jaeger, 85.

[47] Van Seters discusses closely -- verse by verse -- the assignment of sources in the entire story of Moses from *Exodus* through Numbers, as his theory rests upon how the sources interact. See *Moses* 35-63. Cf. R.N. Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch: A Methodological Study* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987) and Greenberg's article on Exodus in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*.

[48] The general disappearance of the Elohist in recent study also eliminates much of the activity of source division.

Van Seters delineates a combination of patriarchal traditions, theophany traditions, prophetic calls and the commissioning of leaders. It is these various elements which account for the apparent repetitions and uneven style. I will consider his ideas in more detail as I work through the passage itself.

Kenneth Jaeger identifies several motifs of his model of Biblical narrative structure in the call narrative. Four of his motifs are present: (5) Divine Initiation of Heroic Trial; (6) Suggestion of Inadequacy; (7) Sign(s) of Confirmation; and (8) Companion Assigned. These motifs divide the narrative along the same kinds of lines as those proposed by many form critics (including Coats below), but integrate it into a whole structure. This enables the narrative to be examined with flexibility as a 'multiform' variant of a folktale[49]. Its whole structure can be compared to other folktales which are based on the Heroic Trial theme. The presence or absence of (or variation in) motifs reveals the specific details and purposes of individual folktales. The common denominators between tales links them to the world view that a culture's folklore constructs in the members of that society. The specifics of the story, even a literary one like the Moses narrative, act on the level of the ideology of the 'reading' community, as was the case for the birth story.

Coats describes a basic general model for call narratives in general which includes a commission, an objection, the superior's reassurance, and a sign of acceptance.[50] These are fairly standard in form criticism, and more interesting is

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[49] Jaeger 113.

[50] Coats, *Moses* 57.

Coats' idea of "the merging of two tradition structures."[51] He writes, "the Moses narratives, structured as heroic saga, merge with narrative tradition about Yahweh's mighty acts, structured around confessional themes. These two structural models stand as narrative opposites, at times complementary, at times contradictory."[52] This structure combines the personal address to and commissioning of Moses with God's declarations of His own future actions.[53] In this way, the repetition becomes development, with a shift occurring between the mighty acts of God and Moses' role.

These ideas are not entirely incompatible. Certainly Coats' saga does not nullify Jaeger's folkloric pattern: Coats is concerned with the nature of the material, the content, while Jaeger works with the structural frame. A saga, by Coats' definition, is "a long prose narration, usually episodic in character, built around a plot or a succession of plots."[54] In Jaeger's theory, "basic to traditional story composition is the idea that each theme exists concretely in many multiforms."[55] The episodes in Coats' definition could function as motifs in Jaeger's themes (the initiatory trial theme being only one possibility) and a motif or group of motifs could build a plot. Specifically in the call narrative, the initiatory trial theme motifs would fulfill the aspect of the personal address and commissioning of Moses (see above).

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[51] Coats, *Saga* 38.

[52] Coats, *Saga* 35.

[53] Coats, *Saga* 38.

[54] Coats, *Saga* 36.

[55] Jaeger 199.

Joining Van Seters to the other two scholars is a different process altogether. The Yahwist-historiographer is, to Van Seters, a specific person(s) in a specific place, not some tradition developed over generations. However, by definition this writer has materials at his disposal. Certainly stories about Moses already existed: we have *Deuteronomy*, which also presents the acts of God, although without detail.[56] Whether these stories were in the form of 'sagas' (which were present in the ancient near east) or folktales -- or both -- is uncertain. Combining Jaeger and Van Seters is relatively easy: the Yahwist (using Van Seters' definition), a talented writer, chose to utilize folktale patterns (models from various sources to tell the story in a certain manner) and folktale material, resulting in the structure observed by Jaeger. However, distinguishing which is a 'genuine' folktale and which is a story told like a folktale is not possible for scholars today. Drawing together Coats and Van Seters does not work as well. Coats demands that a written saga pre-existed and was drawn into another tradition of the acts of God; Van Seters insists that the Yahwist created a very high proportion of the material himself through re-writing, expanding, and combining the existing material with a great deal of his own fabrication. Perhaps the best I can attempt here is to suggest that if a saga did exist beforehand, the ideological revolutions that occurred during the exile and the work of the writer himself both moved it from the periphery to the core of Hebrew literature, and radically changed the manner in which the content was presented.

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[56] Deut. 4:34.

With the basis of my analysis established, a close examination of the text is the next task. From the reformulation of Israel's situation in 2:23-25, the narrative returns to Moses in chapter 3. A strange juxtaposition of images occurs with this shift from the Israelites to Moses. The brief glimpse of the oppression at the end of chapter two brings back the suffering, the bitter and ruthless forced labour, and the genocide. From the cry of help going up before God, and the expectant knowledge that God has heard, the narrative goes back to herding sheep in the desert. By ancient near eastern standards, Moses is not a typical hero, but Biblical heroes often spend a period of time in the desert. Their position of helplessness or role as the underdog emphasizes God's control over the deliverance: He creates a hero from a man who is lacking.[57] The expectancy built up in 2:24-25 is transferred onto the person of Moses.[58]

The first six verses of chapter three begin the theophany. While the burning bush has become a powerful symbol through the story of Moses, Sternberg notes that here, in its original context, it is arbitrary.[59] Fire is often associated with the

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[57] Abraham, Jacob and David all spent time wandering in the wilderness, as do the Israelites as a group later in Exodus. This establishes the hero as chosen and molded only by God (and worthy only because God has chosen him), as well as, specifically in this story, foreshadowing the movement of the nation toward Horeb.

[58] As already noted, 2:23-25 are considered a late addition. Supposing this is true, the narrative would have been much more centered upon Moses in their absence, and shows a decrease in tension. At the same time, the story flows much more smoothly without switching its focus so often. Joining verse 2:22 to 3:1 puts off the expectation of God's immediate action, and so gives a greater effect of the surprise of the theophany. When the reader is told that God has heard, remembered, and is concerned (as is the case in the final form of the narrative), the next story related must naturally be God's action. When the reader has been hearing episodes from Moses' life, and there is no break of 2:23-25, God's action takes up the nature of the event as it must have seemed to Moses: it is without warning. Possible reasons for the switch could lie in the different agendas of the Yahwistic and Priestly writers.

[59] Sternberg, *Poetics* 397. In contrast, symbols like the seven thin cows and the seven thin heads of wheat, which symbolize famine in Genesis 41, are not arbitrary.

appearance of a deity, but usually on a grand scale: volcanoes, lightning or some other terrifying spectacle. For Moses, the bush itself elicits only curiosity, and Moses is not afraid, or perhaps does not even realize that a theophany is occurring, until the Deity identifies himself. Van Seters suggests that the bush is intended to be an etiology of the menorah, thus giving it a place in the cult.[60] This is never stated in the text, and must remain pure speculation.[61]

God takes the initiative in 3:7-12, briefly describing the problem and appointing Moses to the task at hand. The structure of this passage has been identified as a doublet of verses 7-8 and 9-12.[62] While this has been a reason for making a source division between these verses[63], both Coats and Van Seters attribute the structure to the melding of two traditions. For Coats, as already mentioned, a heroic

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[60] Van Seters, *Moses* 41.

[61] Other issues are also involved in this passage, which I will highlight here. Van Seters identifies "four levels of signification in this unit of text: (1) the discovery of a sacred place, Horeb, the mountain of God; (2) the commissioning of a leader for a specific task; (3) the connection between the patriarchal traditions and that of the exodus; (4) the nature of the deity and his presence among his people." The first level involves a much-studied issue in Pentateuchal scholarship. There is an apparent difference in use, location and purpose of Horeb and Sinai in what has been labeled different traditions. As the issues of the discussion do not affect the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to note that the Exodus text is aware of both and considers them to be the same place (through the naming of the mountain, the play on the name Sinai with *seneh*, bush, and the promise in verse 12 that this is the mountain that the Israelites will return to). A further discussion of the issues can be found in E.W. Nicholson, *Exodus and Sinai in History and Tradition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973), as well as Van Seters, *Moses* 286-89. The third and fourth levels will be dealt with later, in the section on the identity of God.

It is the second level of signification which concerns the identity of Moses. Coats notes that the commissioning itself has not actually begun at this point, but is delayed until verse seven (*Saga* 38). This is true, and while the beginnings of other commissionings can certainly be compared to these verses, the actual content is concerned with the identity of God.

[62] It should be noted that, while much of the content of these two sections is similar, 3:7-8 contains no commission. This means that 3:9-12 is not simply a repetition of the earlier verses, and both parts serve a specific purpose.

[63] See references in footnote 45.

saga form is being joined with traditional stories of the acts of God. This results in the opening statement of verses 7-9 "followed, not by an announcement of divine intention, but by a personal commission: 'Come, I will send *you* to Pharaoh'."[64] The next verses, then, are not from a different source, but from a different tradition. Van Seters identifies the same two parts, the announcement of deliverance and the commissioning of a leader, but attributes them to literary sources, specifically the Deuteronomic work in combination with the prophets.[65]

Notable in 3:7-8 are God's words "my people" as a designation for Israel. There are three important things to note about the image of Israel in these particular words. First, they are in the context of a patron-client relationship. The action which follows is entirely that of the patron, who has chosen Israel as His client. Israel, for its part, is beginning the process of learning what this relationship means. Second, these words are part of the self-definition of the ancient Israelites who would have been the readers of this text. The idea of being chosen by YHWH would not have been a new one for them; rather, the process of change in the narrated Israelites would reinforce the ideological structures and cultural definitions of the readers/hearers. Finally, it is a direct speech of YHWH which attaches "my people" to the Israelites. This ratification by the deity increases the affective and objectifying nature of the statement: it must be true, and it deserves to be central in world view. While the people are declared by God as chosen, it will require the actions described in the rest of the verses to begin

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[64] Coats, *Saga* 38.

[65] Van Seters, *Moses* 42-46.

the practical process of the realization of this choice in the experience of the narrated people. Verses 9-12 are more useful in learning about Moses.

Moses' inner state comes to the forefront immediately. His question, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (3:11) is certainly part of a recurring scene or motif in Biblical narrative, and yet there is a difference. He cannot respond, "But am I not a Benjamite, from the smallest tribe of Israel, and is not my clan the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin?" (I Sam. 9:21). Neither can he say, "I am only a child" (Jer. 1:6). It is to these commissionings of Saul and Jeremiah that Van Seters compares this passage.[66] In fact, while the structures of the dialogues may be much the same, the content reveals much that is different.[67] Saul's commissioning was in the form of a cryptic question, and he did not understand the full significance until somewhat later. Jeremiah, on the other hand, responds to a direct command to prophesy to the people, and his concern is directly related to the skill he will need. The combination of the two types of commissioning, prophetic and leadership, is accomplished with masterful subtlety: Moses' question is coming from a man who, of all the Israelites, has grown up in Pharaoh's court. He is educated, trained and he knows how to deal with Egyptians. His statement, "Who am I..." (3:11) reveals the severe effects that oppression and rejection had upon this man who stood so strongly for justice. He is far removed from the man of action portrayed in chapter two.

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[66] Van Seters, *Moses* 42-46.

[67] Consider again Alter's type-scenes. *The Art of Biblical Narrative* 47-51.

When these verses are considered in the context of the Initiatory Trial Theme of the Hero, a sense of tension begins to develop. While the motif of the Suggestion of Inadequacy is present in the heroic schema, it is expanded greatly in this commissioning. The Suggestion of Inadequacy usually "functions most obviously to establish the hero as underdog."[68] This "sharpens the tension within the story by making it more difficult for the hero to achieve a successful solution to the initial problem. Secondly, for whatever reason, audiences tend to identify with, and thus root for, the underdog."[69] The readers, familiar with the form from other stories, would have been comfortable with the motif in the stories of Saul (I Sam. 9) and Gideon (Jud. 6:15). Further, the inadequacy of the hero points to YHWH as the one who makes the man into a hero and gives him success. When it is emphasized to such an extent through repetition, it begins to generate an uncertainty between the knowledge of the heroic narrative (certainty of God's presence and victory) and the reality (in the narrative) of its occurrence here. This is the same tension that exists between the promise-covenant with the patriarchs and the narrative fact of the oppression. In the dynamics of the narrative, the tensions are inseparable. Moses' success, guaranteed in heroic narrative, rests on God's faithfulness; the fulfillment of the covenant rests upon Moses' success.[70] The drama of the situation rests on the insurmountable odds faced by the hero because of the collective oppression. In this

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[68] Jaeger 120.

[69] Jaeger 121.

[70] Cf. Coats' discussion of this, *Saga* 38-39.

passage, and through the rest of the call narrative, the continued Suggestion of Inadequacy heightens the tension.

God gives Moses a sign to reassure the new leader in 3:12. The difficulty is that this sign "is most curious since it has significance only when the exodus event is complete and Moses has brought the people to worship at the place of the theophany."[71] While numerous suggestions have been made regarding the linguistic shape of this verse, none seems to resolve the problems.[72] Van Seters turns to a definition of signs according to the tradition of *Jeremiah*, in which, "The sign is not for the sake of Moses, who does not actually ask for it. It is rather to suggest that the whole course of events that will follow corresponds exactly with the plan and revelation of the deity so that his activity in these events is fully disclosed."[73] The sign is knowledge of God's action before it occurs, but even though they are told, Moses and the Israelites still do not *know*: subsequent narratives are proof of their persisting doubt. This sign becomes a device in the narrative which reveals the need for the transformation of the characters.

As the events unfold, the characters (and the readers) are meant to make the connection between God's promises and His actions through their experience of the events God orchestrates. Even more, it points the reader to a motif which runs

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[71] Coats, *Saga* 46.

[72] Childs, *Exodus*, is generally recommended as a summary of the various trains of thought.

[73] Van Seters, *Moses* 46.

through the plague story: the Israelites are to worship God. This is the objective that God has for the people -- that they will define themselves in relation to YHWH (just as He has already declared that they are His people). Worship is blocked repeatedly by Pharaoh, both in his refusal to let Israel go and in his ability to so discourage the Israelites that they reject the hope of God's rescue (5:21-23; 6:9). Verse 12 is a signal for the reader that the events that follow have significance on a deeper level of mentality and identity, rather than just freeing the slaves.

I will deal more closely with the passage 3:13-22 in the examination of the image of God below. Its main importance here is in the continuation of the dialogue between God and Moses, in which God repeats, but with greater detail, his instructions to Moses. The reason for this may be that, from the questions he asks, Moses apparently did not understand that the God of the Fathers is the God of promise and action.

If this is the case, then in 4:1 Moses still does not 'catch' the message God is sending. Moses' questions in 3:13 and 4:1 relate to his acceptance as God's messenger by the people of Israel. They had rejected his last attempt to help them. Like any prophet or leader, he requires proof that he is truly divinely sent, and Moses wants to be very sure. Sternberg writes, regarding the multiplying of signs, "However conclusive a single miracle might appear from the logical standpoint, the psychology of faith operates by an algebra that quantifies the qualitative."[74] The answers and

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[74] Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 109.

triplicate signs given Moses imply the need for assurance in both Moses and the people, a sign in itself of a lack of faith.[75]

Beginning in 4:10, Moses becomes more personal. The passage reveals a man without confidence in his own abilities. The failure that caused him to flee Egypt has bound him to herding sheep. More than that, he is *without a voice*, void of power. This is perhaps the most common metaphor for the oppressed, that they are not heard -- and do not believe that they will be. This has been demonstrated in the story of the midwives. While the words of the women are an affirmation of a positive aspect of the blessing, Pharaoh heard the negative.[76] Having no voice robs the oppressed of power, but it is the lack of power that robs him/her of the ability to be heard initially. Moses discovered he had no authority when he killed the taskmaster: he lost his voice. Even the presence of God has not bolstered Moses' confidence.

When Moses finally bursts out, "Lord, please send someone else to do it!" (4:13), God returns again to the issue of speech. Here Aaron is introduced to the narrative.[77] Aaron is described as a man who can "speak well" (4:14), and not only

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[75] The triplicate signs are commented upon by most scholars. Van Seters notes the relationship between signs one and three and portions in the P supplements later in the narrative. He stresses that the signs here are to be performed before the people and will be a demonstration powerful enough to convince them. In the P version, they are performed before Pharaoh, and become magician's tricks. (*Moses* 53-54) As supplements, the plagues serve to tie the narrative closer together through similar images, as is often the case in P. The second sign is employed again in the punishment of Miriam.

Another issue raised by Van Seters is the literary relationships of this passage to other scripture. The Gideon and Saul stories are both cited as examples with similar uses of signs. Jaeger adds to this group of heroes Jonathan, who seeks a sign when attacking the Philistine garrison (I Sam. 14). Van Seters also suggests a relationship to the campaigns of Assyrian kings, who would ask for signs from the deity before embarking (*Moses* 51).

[76] This condition of voicelessness is alluded to by Joseph in Genesis 50:24-25, saying that God would come to the Israelites' *aid*, implying that things would not go as well with them after he was gone.

this, but he will speak *for Moses*. Ray Shankman notes that "Moses needs the rod to indicate his visible power or creativity, and he needs Aaron, his 'mouthpiece', to transmit the word of God. Both the rod, in its power to transform, and Aaron, in his power to transmit Moses'/God's word, are external to Moses -- physical props to communicate God's power."[78] "The power and authority represented by the signs resides still in Moses, through God's ordination (v. 28). Indeed, Moses stands as God for Aaron (4:16)."[79] Suddenly, Moses has a voice, but not in the sense that he speaks through Aaron. Rather, Moses is given authority over someone (and a great deal of authority at that), and from this position he can speak -- as a god speaking through his prophet.[80]

With this new authority, Moses returns to his father-in-law, and requests (demands?) that he be allowed to return to Egypt (4:18). Jaeger classifies this as motif

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[77] The sudden appearance of this brother prompted many scholars to dub his presence a secondary addition (Noth, in particular, supports this idea). On the basis of structure and vocabulary, Van Seters rejects this view (*Moses* 51). Jaeger, likewise, finds strong evidence from folktale structures to assert that Aaron is integral to the story (128-129).

[78] Ray Shankman, "The Cut that Unites," *Cross Currents* Summer 1991: 171.

[79] Coats, *Saga* 40.

[80] The change by P in 7:1 to "I have made you as a god to Pharaoh" has been often noted. I suggest that this was a perceptive interpretation of the situation inaugurated here. Moses is given the authority of God over one person, therefore he has the authority of God, in a real psychological sense. Moses here begins a transformation from oppression. P transmutes it to a physical manifestation through his development of the theme in the beginning of the plague narration.

This very theme, however, introduced here and present again in the first plague, is really not developed through the rest of the narrative. (Cf. Coats *Moses*, 95) This may be considered in terms of communication dynamics. Aaron is the voice of Moses; but who becomes the voice of Moses next? The writer first, then the reader. If the passages were read aloud (consider: perhaps during the Passover, and by a priest, the descendant of Aaron), the image becomes even clearer. Further, when Moses' words become mixed with God's in his appearances before Pharaoh, this is because Moses is as a god to Aaron/the reader. By leaving this theme undone, the writer has not taken something away from the work; rather, he has increased its power.

(9) Elder Kin Uninformed. The hero does not mention either the theophany or the commission to his father-in-law. Confident though he may be, Moses still quaffs a bit in confrontation.[81]

Just as 2:11-22 were episodes necessary to move Moses to Midian, so 4:18-28 move him back to Egypt. These verses are more pertinent to the discussion of the image of God below, and I will discuss them in more detail at that point.

Before moving into the rejoining of Moses and his people, I wish to recap the image of the Israelites as developed through Moses in the preceding passages. This question was last considered after the birth story, where the central characteristic of the Israelites was that they were *different* from the Egyptians. The largest development of the people's image has come through the call narrative. Moses, the chosen hero and representative of the people, exhibits himself the characteristics of one oppressed. As the passage progresses, it reveals that he lacks confidence both in his abilities and in the power of God. He is passive, desiring just to be left tending sheep. He feels inadequate and requires assurance far beyond triplicate signs. The culmination of the scene is that he is without a voice and without power, and has been so for so long that he has lost hope. Is this a reliable picture of the people as a whole? The episode of Bricks Without Straw brings the image into clear focus.

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[81] The very uneven nature of the rest of chapter 4 leaves it mostly open to speculation as to what the sources may be. Van Seters suggests that verse 18 is Yahwist, as well as 27-31. 19-23 are assigned to P, and the Bridegroom of Blood incident is beyond speculation. His full analysis and suggestions of literary sources are in *Moses* 64-76. This seems to be a reasonable hypothesis.

1.3 The People and Moses

Moses is incorporated into the group of Israelites in 4.27-31. From the response of the people to the signs and God's promises, it would appear that all Moses' fears had been in vain. The entire necessary process is accomplished. The word of God is known, the action (sign) is performed, and the acquisition of knowledge is complete when the word is given back to God in worship.

If that were the whole story, the Exodus narrative would hardly be as esteemed as it is. The focus of the narrative as Moses and Aaron enter Pharaoh's court -- to proclaim God's decree and lead the people out forthwith -- rests on the Israelites. With no preamble, the two men walk confidently into the king's presence and state their demand.[82] Pharaoh states the very issue upon which the story of *Exodus* rests: "I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go." (5:2) God multiplies signs and wonders so that the knowledge of Himself will spread, while Pharaoh's continued denial of YHWH is demonstrated in continued oppression. With this flat refusal still ringing in the room, *then* Moses and Aaron say the exact words of God from 3:18 -- but adding a pitiful plea about plagues and the sword. This leaves Pharaoh in charge of the situation. He asserts his power by calling them by name, a personal level to which Moses and Aaron are denied reprocicity, and dismissing them to go back to

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[82] There has been much speculation on whether Moses and Aaron were acting under God's orders at this point or not. This first speech is not presented in the text as the one given to Moses; the second one is. Coats (*Moses* 81-82) comments upon the lack of protocol used by Moses and Aaron, and the insult of Pharaoh in response.

work. Later, in 5:17-18, his reply to the foremen will even pun upon the Israelites' request: *work* (5:18) is the same verb as *worship*.[83]

The narrative does not record the exit of Moses and Aaron. The focalization is now with the Egyptians, and enters Pharaoh's thoughts.[84] He betrays the same fears as earlier in the narrative -- except that this is a new Pharaoh. The patterns of behaviour and belief have been passed on to the new generation (cf. 2:23). His response is an act of obvious injustice. The Israelite workload is increased beyond what is possible, even with the threat of physical punishment. The situation is returned to that of 1:10: the Egyptian response to the threat of Israelite power and self-assertion is to keep them working.

The Israelite fore*men* appear before Pharaoh with their complaint, but they are hardly witty enough to draw him to their purposes (unlike the midwives). Pharaoh's refusal to budge reveals his emotion of dread, and so does his charge of laziness. His dilemma is this: if the God of the Hebrews is active, as Moses claims, then the Hebrews' continued growth under duress indicates His favour upon them. If this is true, then the Egyptians have aligned themselves against a god -- a dangerous position to be in. Even worse, the only solution to the problem would be to change the

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[83] Sarna, 29-30. It is certainly the voice of Pharaoh in this work/worship pun; the narrator adds his own polemic word play with heavier/hardened, which is at Pharaoh's expense.

[84] Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1962), has suggested that in verse 5, "Pharaoh said" has equivalent meaning to "Pharaoh thought". (53) While אמר in Qal often means 'to think', it is usually a matter of the reader's judgment which meaning a particular use intends. Certainly in this case, 'thought' is a more reasonable suggestion than that two sources were poorly spliced.

Egyptian treatment of Israel, and Pharaoh is certainly not prepared (yet!) to release the slaves. If Pharaoh does not acknowledge the Lord, he does not need to let Israel go. The irony, of course, is that the reader knows that Pharaoh cannot deny God for long. He is about to become very active in Egypt.

In verse 19, the narrative focuses back upon the Israelites. They have appealed to Pharaoh without blaming him, and they make no second appeal. This implies acceptance of the Pharaoh's words, and when they realize that they are in trouble (19), they turn upon Moses and Aaron. The original situation has come full circle: God's blessing of multiplication caused enslavement; further blessing prompted an attempted genocide; and now the renewal and initial action of fulfillment of the promise result in an increase in oppression.

The picture of the Israelites has been developed through these first chapters, but as a people, they have been static. Tension has increased to the point that their identity is poised on the brink of change. This tension is strongest between the fact of Israelite enslavement -- which is the image of the people portrayed so far -- and the dynamic character of God who declares His choice of the Israelites for His own. To understand this better, let us turn to the portrayal of God in chapters 1-5.

2. Who is God?

2.1 Knowledge by Inference

As the narrative begins, there is little mention of God. He is present in the first verses only by implication. I have already noted that the increase of the Israelite

population was an indication of blessing by a deity. For the Israelite readers, the covenants of YHWH with the patriarchs were here being fulfilled.[85]

Further, the ancient reading community was already aware of the 'end of the story': YHWH miraculously delivers His people. There must be an oppression for a salvation, and the more dire the situation for the enslaved people, the greater the rescue will be. The emphasis upon how ruthless the Israelites were worked, the hopelessness of their situation and the threat of genocide all foreshadow the scope of events in the salvation, and increase the stature and power of YHWH.

The only actual mention of God in the narrative itself in chapter one is in the story of the midwives. Here, in His reward to the women for their faithfulness and courage, YHWH remains the God of promise (1:21). The promise of families to the midwives may be the explanation for the inclusion of their names, possibly referring to some record that listed their families and descendants (although this is speculative). On another level of interpretation, God is described as "doing good to the midwives" (1:20), a positive attribute of His creativity and action.[86]

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[85] What exactly the readers may have associated with the multiplication is open to speculation according to the theory of Biblical formation. My underlying assumption here is the textual formation theory of Van Seters. Here, the readers are familiar with some of the Prophetic writings (*Ezekiel*, *Jeremiah* and *Isaiah* figure centrally), with *Deuteronomy*, and the book of *Genesis* as formulated by the Yahwist (and which immediately precedes *Exodus*). They are living during the Exile, and when the Priestly supplements are made, they are back in the land.

However, if Rendtorff's theory is accepted, then the readers may not associate the patriarchs so closely with this occasion. In earlier versions, before the sections were redacted together, this may have been seen as a part of an entirely different covenant initiation by YHWH. Work by other scholars will entail different views of who the readers of this passage were in ancient Israel.

[86] The use of this verb, זכר, in reference to God seems to point generally to either a reward given by God, or to the fulfillment of His covenant with Israel. Cf. Josh 24:20 and Num 10:29,32.

The narrative continues along without mention of God again (although He is implicitly present in the 'lucky coincidences' in the birth story) until 2:23-25. Here the divine agency is truly introduced. This passage has generated questions regarding the idea of God *remembering*.[87] What image of God is present if He is portrayed as forgetting His people in bondage? However, examination of the preceding chapter shows that God had not forgotten the people, only to be roused by their cries. In fact, His blessing has rested upon them the entire time, despite the persecution (although the blessing seems to cause the oppression to increase. Cf. 1:12), and He has been preparing a deliverer. Certainly the term 'remember' is used in the sense of Genesis 8:1, in which God remembers Noah and the animals in the ark. In the story of the flood, it is evident that remembering means the initiation of divine action in the situation. Similarly, God enters the scene in 2:23-25 to begin His direct action in the formation of the nation of Israel. *Remember* is used in the sense of fulfilling a contract or, in this case, covenant. Israel has not been forgotten, but the time is now right for the promises to be acted upon. The 'patron' deity is starting to work on the business of establishing of His 'client', Israel, among the nations of the world.

2.2 Definition of the Deity

God's involvement begins immediately in the next episode. He enters as a fire symbol, but far different from the manner in which fire is usually used in describing a

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[87] Eslinger 56; Childs 28.

deity. Rather than lightning or a pillar of fire, evoking fear, God appears in the burning bush, rousing Moses' curiosity. The reason for this may be ideological, to separate YHWH from other gods without completely breaking the tie between this manifestation, the pillar of fire which guides the nation and the consuming fire at Mount Sinai later in the text (24:17). On a narratological level, this type of appearance allows for a freer discussion between God and Moses. If God were altogether intimidating, opportunity would be lost for the type of character development of Moses that occurs in the call narrative. Coats writes, "From the beginning the narrative depicts a personal address to Moses. This point is established, not simply by the speech formulas that note when a speech of Yahweh is addressed to Moses. It is a part of the dialogue, the opening double vocative which honors Moses by name, *Mosheh, Mosheh*."[88] The burning bush is an appropriate vehicle for introducing just such a personal dialogue.

Before any statement of identity, God commands Moses to remove his shoes: the ground is holy. God initially identifies Himself as the God of the Patriarchs. Again, the statement begins personally: "I am the God of *your* father..." (3:6). It is a very formal -- and formulaic -- introduction. This statement echoes 2:24, where the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob remembers His covenant with them.[89] Additionally, the relationship of men to YHWH is portrayed in the command to Moses to remove

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[88] *Saga* 38. Cf. 1 Sam. 3:10 for a similar personal address.

[89] If 2:23-24 is a late supplement, then in the original text 3:6 was the first real tie to the patriarchs and to the covenant. Without the additional verses, this appearance is much more like the theophanies to the patriarchs, unexpected and unanticipated in the narrative. 2:23-25, however, increase the sense of the action of God and the dramatic excitement.

his shoes (which, presumably he does) and in Moses covering his face. God is to be respected, or feared -- approached as one would approach the king of the earth.

God's speech in verses 7-12 announces the deliverance of the Israelites. In Coats' schema, "The commission itself, vv.7-12, begins without reference to Moses. Yahweh reports His experience: 'I have seen the affliction of *my* people...I have heard their cry...I know their suffering.' And then He announces his intentions: 'I have come down to deliver them...'"[90] This is, according to Coats, from the 'mighty acts of God' tradition, while verses 9-12 make a shift to commissioning Moses as an active agent in God's purposes. This presents the image of a God who is powerful and active in the world, but who also chooses to work through a human agent.

Van Seters also approaches this as a two-part structure.[91] The announcement of deliverance (7-8) is based upon a DtrH "motif of God's heeding the cry of his people because of foreign oppression...[but] this deliverance in *Exodus* is not just one of a number of such occasions in the past but the one most central to the faith..."[92] Even though possibly modeled upon other announcements, this event is really the model for all others. This is the central event in the depiction of YHWH as Saviour. Verses 9-12 are the commissioning of the leader -- God's specific response to set in action the announcement of 7-8. Verse 12, while most often discussed in terms of its

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[90] *Saga* 38.

[91] As already noted above -- as is the fact that this passage has been divided into sources rather than according to literary structure by some scholars.

[92] Van Seters, *Moses* 42.

nature as a sign, is a formulation of YHWH's view of His people. He sees them as a nation free from bondage and defined in terms of Himself through worship. These six verses, with the exception of verse 11, are a description of the people of Israel in the words of God, revealing His perspective of them.

The next verses of the call narrative are arguably the most-discussed of all the Hebrew Bible. They are also central to the discussion of 'Who is God?' in the Exodus story. Verse 13 is a parallel to the question in verse 11[93]: Moses asks first, "Who am I...?" and then "Who are you?" Source criticism has generally divided 14-15 into a variety of sources; Van Seters suggests rather a double answer of the Yahwist. The first part, verse 14, gives the meaning of the name *YHWH* through a pun. As a "rather late speculative interpretation of the meaning of the divine name"[94], אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה focuses upon the uniqueness of YHWH. This is perhaps the main theme of the book of *Exodus*: coming to know God by what he does -- "I will be what I will be" (14).[95] This first discourse on the name defines the meaning of YHWH for the second part, verse 15. In Van Seter's theory, the patriarchal stories of Genesis were non-existent in Israel at the time of the writing of the Yahwist historiography, so the Yahwist had to make connections between the 'God of the Exodus' (which already existed in the ideology) and the 'God of the Patriarchs' (which the Yahwist nearly invented). Ezekiel 20:5-6 "specifically indicates that God appeared to the Israelites in

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[93] Van Seters, *Moses* 46.

[94] Van Seters, *Moses* 47.

[95] Eslinger discusses this in depth, although his conclusions are somewhat debatable, in "Freedom or Knowledge".

Egypt as Yahweh. For Ezekiel this is the true beginning of Israel. He does not recognize the patriarchal traditions of origin."[96] To deal with the Ezekiel text, the writer of *Exodus* tied the originality of YHWH in verse 14 together with the God of *Genesis* in verse 15. In this way, these verses have significance for the ancient readers as an expansion of their view of origins based on their knowledge of God.

These verses also have significance for the narrative. "Yahweh's very name is a sign to guarantee the promise."[97] God promises that He will bring out the people, if they have doubts about who he is, the name is the reply that God is the God who is proving His covenant. The name is instated here as part of the nation's identity, to be fulfilled as one generation passes the name on to the next. The theme of God as active continues in verses 16-22. Moses is instructed in his commission, which God Himself takes responsibility to accomplish with "wonders" (20). All this, however, is still in the future. Knowledge is indeed given to Moses -- in the form of the powerful word of God, to be sure -- yet Israel is still enslaved.

Moses' objections highlight the difference in perspective between the man and God. 4:1-17 describes accordingly a process of change in the man, worked out by God to make him into a great hero. Each of Moses' objections is answered beyond what he could reasonably ask, until he has no more, and God orders him to go.

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[96] Van Seters, *Moses* 47. This seems to be a plausible explanation, although I would tend to say that the traditions already existed in some form, and were brought from the periphery to the core by the Yahwist, rather than attributing them to his invention.

[97] Coats, *Saga* 39.

The image of God to this point is multi-sided. From the first chapter, a tension has developed between the enslaved position of the Israelites and the knowledge of the reader that the Israelites are the chosen people of God. This generates the expectancy that God will be powerfully revealed as Deliverer and Saviour. In the story of the midwives, God is portrayed as doing good, the rewarder of faithfulness and courage. It is in the call narrative that all comes together. Perhaps the best word that could be used of the image of God is dynamic: He is the God of the Covenant, and He is acting upon it; He is personal, engaging in dialogue with the appointed leader, but He is also holy; He is the God of the Fathers, but He is unique. Above all, He is the God who has claimed Israel as "my people", entwining His identity with theirs.

2.3 On the Way to Egypt

This same track continues in verses 18-23. God gives additional reassurances, and reinforces His instructions. In verse 23, another facet is added to God's view of Israel: it is His 'firstborn son'. In the ancient near east, this was a term used for the leader among the sons -- not necessarily the first one born (although that may have been the norm), but the one who was the greatest. The term was also often used outside of a familial situation to mean 'foremost'. Whatever the exact cultural signification, the 'firstborn' is a theme which clearly runs through *Exodus*. It begins here, and becomes central in the tenth plague (11:1-12:30) and the rites of consecration of the firstborn (13:11-16), with the components of sacrifice and

redemption central throughout. The 'Incident at the Lodging-Place' is tied to this as well, and immediately follows God's declaration in 4:23.

Exodus 4:24-26 is one of the strangest passages in the Hebrew Bible. Even the very basic questions of who is acting -- or what pronouns refer to whom -- are hotly debated.[98] The two general agreements are that the passage is supplementary and that some basic cultural meaning or tradition has been lost. A feminist perspective might add that it is yet another fragmented narrative with a woman as the acting character -- perhaps deliberately obscured by a writer or editor.[99] However, fragmentary though it may seem, this episode contributes to the narrative as a whole in some important ways.

W.H. Propp makes some interesting observations on the passage in his article, "That Bloody Bridegroom." After a survey of various interpretive problems, he states, "In general, the Bible reflects a conviction that dealings with divinities are fraught with peril for human beings...The sudden attack upon Moses is less surprising than appears

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[98] Shankman summarizes the problems of this passage as follows:

> Translators have had trouble locating the antecedent for the pronoun "him" (1.24). Is it Moses or is it his son Gershom? *The King James* and *The Torah* leave the matter open; the *New English Bible* interprets the context and holds that God sought to kill Moses. The passage provokes further questions: Why does God want to kill "him"? (Moses, after all, is on a God-sanctioned journey back to Egypt to ask Pharaoh to let his people go.) What is the relationship between God's seeking to kill "him" and Zipporah's life-creating act of circumcision? To whose 'leg' does she touch the foreskin -- Gershom's or Moses'? And what does "blood-bridegroom" mean in this context? Further, this passage -- set off as it is from the rest of the text -- seems to interrupt the narrative. Does it so in fact? (169)

Cf. W.H. Propp, "That Bloody Bridegroom," *Vetus Testamentum* 43.4 (1993): 495-498 for more discussion, as well as bibliographical information.

[99] Cf. Day.

at first."[100] Propp focuses on דָּמִים, blood, to discover the purpose of the incident in the narrative. He contends that Moses is guilty of the bloodshed of the Egyptian, and God demands that atonement must be made for this before the consecrated mission is carried through. The narrator, according to Propp, has the additional purpose of giving the etiology of the phrase 'bridegroom of blood'. Finally, he also affirms the parallels between this circumcision and the pashal ceremony.[101] All these components serve to highlight the rooting of the passage in the narrative and its advancement of themes, even though its nature may be supplementary.

This episode is also the object of study in Ray Shankman's article, "The Cut That Unites." Shankman views the bloody-bridegroom episode as a micro-story of the Exodus narrative. Moving from the call narrative, Shankman states that "the voice of the future -- 'I will be that I will be' -- shall become manifest, since God has ordained the truth of what *will be*. God becomes defined through the power of His very speech."[102] This power of the word of God necessitates an experiential change in Moses in order for the man to internalize it, for it to become knowledge. This experience occurs in the episode at the Lodging-Place. God seeks to kill Moses, but Moses is saved by Zipporah's action of circumcising her son and pronouncing the 'bridegroom of blood' puzzle.[103] The power of God, defined in His name and word

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[100] Propp 499. Dealing with human kings was 'fraught with peril' in the ancient world, so how much more so it would apply to a deity.

[101] Propp 511.

[102] Shankman 171.

(3:14), becomes reality in Moses' life through the threat of death. The covenant of God[104], also His word, likewise becomes reality through the sign of circumcision. Abraham and his descendants were to circumcise all males for inclusion in the covenant (Gen. 17:10-14). Shankman points out that the action is complete, i.e "he left him alone" (4:26), only when Zipporah makes her statement. This turns the intense experience into word again. The pattern that results is this: first the word from God is given, then the action happens, and finally the action is completed in word again. This process is necessary for God to effect change in Moses' identity. For Moses, the action must be based upon the previous word in order to have meaning, and then the action must be transformed into word again in order to appropriate the experience into his identity and world view. Whatever Zipporah's statement refers to, it most certainly indicates a change in who Moses is. Shankman speaks of cutting covenants between YHWH and Moses, and Moses and Zipporah, which amounts to saying that in the interaction, the characters become defined in relation to one another by the combination of word and act, and the definition binds them together.

The image of God here acquires a shading mentioned by Propp. He has a 'perilous' aspect.[105] The Divine is bound together with the world of man by the acts of YHWH, whose power supersedes the abilities of man, just as a king has power over

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[103] The pronouns in this section are not entirely clear in their referents, but this scenario seems the most widely accepted. Shankman describes the concept of 'kill' on a physical level, and on a metaphysical one, in which 'kill' means 'transformation' (172).

[104] It is noteworthy that the word ברית does not occur here, but the covenant of God to Abraham is present by implication through the circumcision (cf. Genesis 17:9-14).

[105] Propp 499.

his subjects (but on a grander scale). Beyond this, however, YHWH is also the God who has entered a covenant with Israel, in which He will create them as His chosen people. In the narrative of that follows, "Pharaoh's spiritual stiffening will keep the Israelites in physical bondage, while Moses' physical marvels will transform a people spiritually."[106] The very nature of covenant with God requires this type of ideological/physical process.

To conclude, the episodes have laid the ground work for the course of movement in the next section of the narrative. Knowledge of who the Israelites are -- powerless and lacking confidence, slaves -- creates a sharp difference between the Israelites and the Egyptians as the narrative progresses. This difference is stacked in favour of the Egyptians, who hold the position of superiority and control, yet the potential for a reversal is also present, through the narratives of the midwives and the birth of Moses -- and presumably the reader's knowledge of the 'end of the story'.[107] Hebrew identity is poised either for dissolution under increased oppression, or redemption through won freedom. Tension exists also in the image of God. His dynamic essence is both unchanging and incomprehensible: the covenant is remembered, and yet the oppression continues. The promise by God of liberation for

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[106] Shankman 171.

[107] While the readers know what will happen (if for no other reason than that they are Israelites who descend from those in Egypt, and so everything must work out), in the narrative the Israelites are the underdog, and this is important in the narrative's development of Israelite identity in relation to the power of YHWH. It also attracts the sympathies of the readers, as people tend to identify with the underdog.

the people, of signs and wonders to oppose the unrelenting severity of Pharaoh's actions, finally sets the narrative moving.

Part II: Movement

Movement is key to the Exodus narrative. Three levels of movement are present in chapters seven to fourteen: (1) the physical movement of the Israelites out of Egypt; (2) a social/psychological movement out of slavery; and (3) the movement towards a national identity intertwined with the knowledge of YHWH and leading to a covenant with YHWH. These levels are mutually interdependent, each requiring the others to progress.

1. Out of Egypt

God's promises to the people in *Exodus* begin with the deliverance from Egypt, accompanied by signs and wonders, and continue to include the arrival in Canaan (3:7-8; 3:17; 6:6-8; 12:25). In the actual narrative of *Exodus*, however, the first half of the book brings them just outside Egypt, while the second half leads them only part way through the wilderness. Even more, the bulk of the second half is occupied by YHWH's divine instructions and the covenant, so that it is largely the first part of the text which is concerned with geographical movement, or *exodus*. The movement that is described in these chapters, then, is ultimately movement towards the promised land, but it is the movement out of, or away from Egypt that is more central narratologically.

1.1 The Image of Egypt

In physical terms, Egypt is a land of plenty in many references in the Hebrew Bible.[1] For the patriarchs, Egypt is an oasis in times of drought. Abraham went there to

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[1] In prophecy against Egypt, of course, the country is threatened with physical desolation.

escape famine (Gen. 12:10), Isaac considered it (Gen. 26:2)[2] and Jacob sent his sons there to get food twice (Gen. 42:1, 43:1) and finally went himself, after the success of Joseph was revealed (Gen. 46:1-7). For Jacob's sons, it was the land of opportunity, where they were promised by Pharaoh, "I will give you the best of all Egypt, and you can enjoy the fat of the land." (Gen. 45:18). Even the Israelites of *Exodus* perceive it as plentiful. "There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted" (Exod. 16:3).[3] The image of Egypt as plentiful, then, has to be countered from the very beginning with the promise of an even more abundant land.[4]

But change occurs in the desirability of Egypt even without the prospect of a better land. The plagues wreck destruction throughout the nation.[5] The first plague attacks the water supply -- a precious resource, especially in a desert area. The effect of

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[2] Sternberg 396-7.

[3] Juxtaposed with the images of physical wealth is Egypt as the house of bondage; this, however, is ideological, and belongs in the second stage of this chapter.

[4] Cf. Fernando Ainsa, "Utopia, Promised Lands, Immigration and Exile," *Diogenes* 119 (1982): 49-64

[5] The discussion of the historical weight of this narrative is beyond the parameters of this paper. The descriptions are the likely images of the land generated by the narrative for the ancient listeners. Additional discussion of the symbolic value of the plagues, and their role in generating a sense of historical disaster for Egypt, can be found in Terence E. Fretheim, "Ecological Signs of Historical Disaster," *JBL* 110(1991): 385-396.

The discussions of the plagues as narrative require some comment.

Studies of the plagues which focus upon the final form of the text have delineated several versions of the structure of the passage. Some pose a 3x3+1 format (Blenkinsopp 154) or a chiasm. These analyses highlight the crystallization of the narrative by the final form.

Most source-oriented work divides the narrative into two (J and P) or three (J, E and P) sources and studies the development of the individual traditions (if possible). (So Coats, *Moses* 81-109)

Van Seters, *Moses*, postulates one original narrative, written by the Yahwist from the suggestions of 'signs and wonders' in *Deuteronomy*. J constructed seven plagues: (1) the Nile to blood, (2) frogs, (3) flies, (4) pestilence, (5) hail, (6) locusts, (7) death of the firstborn. (77) The remaining plagues were supplements by P. The textual evidence for this theory appears to be quite strong, and the supplementary nature of P does not rule out the various structural formats mentioned above; in fact, the general style of P would encourage reading such possibilities.

changing the Nile to blood is to cause a great deal more work for the Egyptians, in digging around the river to find fresh water. The sign also seems to last for a limited time, and the magicians can duplicate it. (7:14-25) The second sign is similar. Frogs, while a nuisance, causing the increased work of cleaning up and a stench, constitute more of a joke (at Egypt's expense) than serious destruction.[6] (7:26-8:11) Gnats, the third plague (8:12-15), and flies, the fourth plague(8:16-28), follow the same line, but here the magicians cannot duplicate them. Insect bites also affect personal comfort a great deal more than frogs. Although the first four plagues are displays of YHWH's power, they leave Egypt relatively intact.[7]

From this point onward, the signs become more destructive. The plague on the livestock depletes the food supply, slows the transportation system and reduces the number of animals available for agricultural work.[8] (9:1-7) The plague of boils causes serious harm to the population.[9] (9:8-12) Hail is the next force of destruction -- and hail so violent that not only are crops destroyed, but the lives of animals and people are threatened.[10] (9:13-35) There is still some hope left after the hail: wheat and smelt mature

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[6] Pharaoh, with frogs in his palace and bed, seems to have run out of patience -- not at all helped by the magicians abilities to make *more* frogs. He actually calls in Moses and Aaron to ask them to remove the animals. Additional irony is present in that the frog is often a fertility symbol. (Cassuto 101)

[7] Of importance here is the statement in 8:24 that the land was ruined by the flies. While this is difficult to imagine, it is stated in the narrative. Without doubt, the ruin caused by the next plagues is more dramatic.

[8] The main problem with this passage has been that while the livestock are said to have all died, they continue to appear in the following plagues. Cassuto's conclusion that 9:6 is hyperbole appears reasonable (111).

[9] From Lev. 13:18-23, boils were often a serious problem and a sign of infectious disease.

more slowly, so these crops survived (and the remaining animals could graze on the destroyed barley). The locusts end this possibility. (10:1-20) When this plague is first announced, "Pharaoh's officials said to him, '...Do you not yet realize that Egypt is ruined?'" (10:7). Pharaoh ignores this, and Egypt is left a wasteland: "Nothing green remained on tree or plant..." (10:15). The ninth plague, darkness, does less damage to the land (besides stopping normal life), and rather becomes a symbol of chaos and destruction, as though even the sun has deserted the land. The final plague finishes the transformation of Egypt into a land of death, in which the firstborn sons are killed.[11] The effect is described in very physical terms: an eerie wailing in the night is the first herald of the plague's completion, and there is not a *house* without someone dead (12:30). The image of the land has moved from the land of plenty to the land of desolation.

1.2 Movement by Geography

Physical movement in the plague narratives occurs on another level as well. Geography becomes important in the distinction between the Israelites and the Egyptians. In the first three plagues, the events seem to affect everyone equally. In the fourth plague, however, God proclaims that Goshen, where the Israelites live, will not be affected by the flies (8:18). The two lands are separated. This is repeated in the fifth plague, and emphasized by the statement that Pharaoh sent men to investigate it (9:7). The effect is

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[10] The image of a field flattened by hail would be sickening for a farmer listening. When grain is 'headed out', it is flattened from waist-high to a hard-packed ankle-deep layer.

[11] This passage gives extra irony to the Israelite complaint in 14:11, "Were there no graves in Egypt...?". The symbolic aspect of the death of the firstborn will be dealt with later.

that the Israelites and the Egyptians seem to move apart already. No mention is made of distinction in the sixth plague, but in the seventh, hail, the physical separation is augmented by an ideological one: the Egyptians are given opportunity to save at least their animals and workers, and those who fear God act accordingly (9:19-21). The distinction is made again in the plague of darkness, where the Israelites symbolically have light where they dwell (10:22). At the outset, Israel fills the land of the Egyptians (1:7). A small step in perspective is taken when the land of Goshen is distinguished from Egypt as a whole. This step becomes larger with repetition.[12] By the end, in the Egyptians' land there is darkness, death and wailing, while in the Israelites' land there is light, salvation and "not a dog barks" (11:7). The illusion is that Israel is in a different place already; perspective has generated the appearance of motion.

1.3 Leaving the Land

Actual physical exodus happens finally in chapters 12-14. Interestingly, the Israelite departure is made under duress: Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron in the middle of the night and drives the Israelites away (12:31-36). Further, the route taken is not a direct one away from Egypt to Canaan, but gives the appearance that they are "wandering around the land in confusion" (14:3). The choice of such a route is explained

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[12] In the plague of hail, some of the Egyptians turn to YHWH. The emphasis thus is placed on Israel as YHWH's chosen people: it is not by any of their own merit that they are delivered (as the Egyptians are also capable of faith) but it rests solely upon YHWH's action. In my estimation, the 'conversion' of the Egyptians does not decrease the distance that has been built. Rather, it serves to point out the character of Pharaoh and the distance he is from YHWH.

in two ways. One is to lure Pharaoh into pursuit, culminating in the Red Sea.[13] The other is God's statement, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt" (13:17). Both of these explanations are really facets of the same problem. The Israelite 'slave mentality' is the reason for avoiding war, and the event at the Red Sea is meant to reorient Israelite identity from comparisons with the Egyptians to a relationship with YHWH. These topics lead away from the physical component of the Exodus to the social/psychological and religious factors.

2. *Transforming the Slaves*

The movement out of slavery requires a social and psychological transformation. The Israelites must be moved out of their position as an oppressed group; then, psychologically, they must *believe* that they have moved out of this social position. Their perception of themselves must change. The narrative acts on two levels to accomplish these movements. First, the people in the Exodus narrative progress from the 'Bricks Without Straw' episode, in which "they did not listen [to Moses] because of their discouragement and cruel bondage" (6:9) to the Red Sea, where "the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant" (14:31). The second level is a narratological progression, accomplished by shifts in focalization, through which the reader participates in the movement to freedom. These two components form the basis for my discussion of the deliverance from slavery.

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[13] See *Intertwining Identities* below.

2.1 Altering Characters

Again in this section, the change in the Israelites is viewed most clearly through the figures of Moses and Aaron.[14] The image of Moses in the Bricks Without Straw passage was of a man who had lost any power he had had in relation to Pharaoh during the first confrontation, and who had been rejected by the Israelites as their leader. This image is familiar -- Moses is in the same position as he was before the call narrative. There is a difference, however. While he is demoralized, he turns his complaint to God rather than leaving (5:22-23). God repeats the material from the call narrative (3:15-20; 6:1-8) but a change has occurred: this time Moses *hears* the words.[15] By beginning to take action, stepping out in faith, his thought processes have also begun to change. The inclusion of the genealogy at this point is the narrative indication of this. With the listing of their place in Israel, and the emphasis placed on the role they play in the liberation of the people (6:27), the establishment of Moses' and Aaron's leadership has begun. The figure of Moses as a political and even military leader is most important in order to understand the movement out of slavery.[16] In 6:30[17], Moses again protests that he is

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[14] In fact, for most of the plague narrative, this is the *only* way to examine the process of change, as the people of Israel are not present in the discussions between Moses and Pharaoh.

[15] God had already told Moses that he would not succeed in persuading Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave. Moses was so concerned with the possibility that he might fail in the negotiations, that he did not understand that his words were *supposed* to fail. Only by continued unsuccessful appeals to Pharaoh could God work the plagues, and the process of forming Israelite identity requires both words and active power.

[16] Especially useful here is the image of Moses presented by Coats in *Moses* 81-109. Moses is described in heroic terms, inspiring the people to leave their captivity.

[17] In 6:12 as well, the question is repeated at the resumption of the narrative.

inadequate, but this time he listens to the instruction from God and offers no more objection. This gain in confidence -- not yet in himself, but in God -- is the first step towards freedom.

The plagues begin, and the change in Moses continues. At first, he repeats word-for-word what YHWH has said. Much of the action of Moses and Aaron, in fact, is simply implied through the commands of God.[18] By the second plague, however, the leader is already gaining heart, evidenced by his offer to allow Pharaoh to set the time for removing the frogs (*followed* by his prayer to God to accomplish this!). In the fourth plague he enters the negotiations, even rebuking Pharaoh for dealing deceitfully. Increasingly through to the end of plague nine, Moses becomes spirited and dynamic, a clear reversal from the man in the wilderness crushed by his past.

At the end of the ninth plague, Moses confronts Pharaoh for the last time. Pharaoh puts an end to negotiations, but Moses inverts his pronouncement to a declaration of final judgment[19]. He has moved so far from the mentality of an oppressed man that he stalks out from the court angry and in charge.[20] As a result of his increased

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[18] This is a step forward from the inconfidence evident in the first audience with Pharaoh. Indeed, Moses and Aaron are invested with power gained through the words of God. To say that they simply repeated God's words is complementary (this is, after all, the role of a prophet). However, Biblical heroes are also active and independent much of the time (see Coats and Jaeger), and Moses' increased participation is an indication of his freedom within.

[19] This is an example of the cunning Coats sees in the Moses figure: "What Moses could not win by open negotiation he wins by cunning. His cunning skill is depicted for the narrative by the spoil and secret escape, a description of the exodus now reduced to fragments by the death of the first-born." (*Saga* 40) While the source-structural assumptions are debatable, it is certain that Moses exhibits the same wit as the midwives of chapter one.

[20] Van Seters suggests that in the original form of the text, 10:28-29 appeared part way through 11:8. The result would read: "All these officials of yours will come to me, bowing down before me and saying, 'Go, you and all the people who follow you!' After that I will leave." Pharaoh said to Moses, 'Get out of

individuality, Moses is now the strange combination of a prophet announcing divine judgment and a political leader negotiating with an oppressor.[21]

The change in Moses, then, is great. The people 're-enter' the narrative in chapter 12. Now, when Moses summons the elders, they listen to him. As in 4:31, the people bow down and worship; there is a difference, however, in this response. In chapter four the people worshipped, but the words were not accompanied by any action[22], while here, "The Israelites did just what the Lord commanded Moses and Aaron." (12:28) A transformation has begun.

Taking the first steps out into the wilderness is an assertion of identity for the Israelites. However, the route taken by the people in 13:17 indicates that the change in them is not yet profound enough. God does not lead the people "through the Philistine country" (13:17), even though that is the shorter path. Instead, the Israelites go down to the Red Sea. The reason for this is, "if they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt." This is not unfounded, as the first reaction of the people when they see the Egyptian army is to wish to be back in slavery rather than die (14:11-12).[23] It is

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my sight...The day you see my face you will die.' 'Just as you say,' Moses said. 'I will never appear before you again.' Then Moses, hot with anger, left Pharaoh." (*Moses* 77,108).

[21] Van Seters, *Moses* 100: "Moses plays another role in the plague narrative that is interwoven with the role of the prophet and is in some tension with it. This is a political role in which Moses is the leader of his people who negotiates with Pharaoh for their release. The tension between them is clear, for how can the absolute demands of the deity be subject to negotiations?" The role as prophet becomes central in the discussion of the movement towards knowledge of God.

[22] It has been noted that the elders were supposed to appear with Moses and Aaron before Pharaoh, and yet no mention of them was made. The midrash tells the story of the elders losing nerve on the way to the court, and slowly dropping off before they arrive.

[23] In the various studies of oppression in the 20th century, one of the most noted things is that the oppressed must *act* to truly obtain their freedom (Memmi). The Israelites have remained passive through

through a display of God's power before their eyes (many of the plagues had not affected the Israelites, and so they did not experience them fully) that they come to recognize God. As I shall show in a following section, it is this knowledge that gives them an identity to replace their oppressed mindset.

2.2 Transforming the Reader

The second level of transformation draws the reader into the change beginning to occur in the Israelite nation. Through most of the plagues there are interactions between God and Moses/Aaron, between Moses/Aaron and Pharaoh, and between Pharaoh and his court. The shifts in perspective occur between Moses and Pharaoh, with a predominant view of the effects of God's actions upon the *Egyptians*. Specifically, the Egyptians at first dismiss the signs when the magicians can duplicate them (7:6-8:15), the magicians begin to see the 'finger of God' in the plagues, but Pharaoh ignores them (8:19), the Egyptians see a 'distinction' between the Israelites and themselves when the livestock die (9:7); the ranks of Pharaoh's court are divided in reaction to the plague of hail (9:20-21), the court protests to Pharaoh at the threat of locusts, and he half-heartedly negotiates to satisfy them (10:7-11). In all of these, it is the state of the Egyptians which concerns the narrative. Additionally, a tension is built up through the shifts between Pharaoh asking Moses to pray for relief (8:8; 8:28; 9:27-28; 10:17) and the hardening of his heart against

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all this, and so it appears that some other process is involved here. I suggest that the difference is found in the direct action of the Deity. Israelite identity as it is formed here is primarily a religious one in which the people define themselves in terms of YHWH rather than the national ethnic identities sought in the 20th century (such as negritude).

Moses' request (7:13, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 12, 34; 10:20, 27) -- played out in the negotiations between the two men.[24] All through the plagues, the narration is situated in the place of power, the Egyptian court.

Before the tenth plague, however, there is a change in focus. As Van Seters notes, the perspective of the plagues shifts from the Egyptians, in plagues one through nine, to the Hebrews in their preparations for the Passover and departure.[25] In fact the beginning of this change is in 10:1-2. Here God tells Moses that the purpose of the plagues is "that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I performed my signs among them, and that you may know that I am the Lord", a different narrative stance than in 9:14-16, where the plagues are performed as signs to enlighten the Egyptians, and the whole world, in the power and knowledge of God. The last time the text shows any concern with the Egyptians is the summary of 11:9-10. In chapter twelve the narrative turns toward the Israelites, with depictions of the newly instated festivals and ceremonies. The episodes interspersed between the descriptions of the various rituals are also focused upon the Israelites from this point on.

This change in perspective of the narrative, from concern with the Egyptians to focusing upon the Hebrews has the effect of leading the intended reader out of Egypt with the Israelites. At the outset, the reader[26] is occupied with the events in Egypt, because these are the concerns of the narrative. The text then turns to the Israelites, the promises

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[24] A further discussion of the purpose of the plagues for both the Egyptians (including the hardening of Pharaoh's heart) and the Israelites is in *Intertwining Identities* below.

[25] *Moses*, 179.

[26] By reader, I mean the ancient Israelites, who would have either read it (if educated) or heard it read.

of imminent release and the future generations which will hear of the event, the reader is concerned with these first because the narrative makes them central, but equally because *he* is one of these future Israelites. The rituals described have, in some form, been a part of the life of the community of ancient readers, and so the story of the departure becomes 'my' story.[27] 'My' identity (i.e. that of the ancient reader) helps to form that of the new nation. The world-knowledge of the reader fills in the gaps in the narrative, broadening and deepening the characters through the cross-over between the 'real world' and the 'textual world'. In this way, the reader asserts his own identity in and through the identity of the characters. At the same time, the reader enters the story more completely by a closer association, and so the text can transform him.

2.3 Summary

The two levels, physical and psychological, work together to show the development of the slaves into a group that claims identity as a chosen people. The process is not complete -- Israel has not come to Sinai yet -- but the first steps have been taken. The physical movement is necessary to change the people's slave mentality, and

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[27] William G. Doty, *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals* (Alabama: U of Alabama Press, 1986), defines myth in this way: the instrument by which we make experience intelligible, give meaning to life and understand our awareness of the universe (11). I wish to highlight some aspects of his work. First, the telling of myth is participating in your own, and culture's inner significance. The story is the answer to unanswerable questions, saying, "It's like this, isn't it?" It links generations and provides a framework for consciousness. Any one myth involves the whole complex of myths in a society, allowing at the same time experimentation with the incorporeal. Myth draws the individual out of his own consciousness into the larger universe, especially through the essential roots it provides to the life of a culture. It conveys values and gives paradigms.

Because the passage contains such strong ritualistic emphasis (a noted part of myth by Doty), it is involved in the above processes, and holds power above ordinary narrative. This is the 'recreated voice' of the Israelite people across time to the generations who are to be told the story of the Exodus.

the new confidence of the people is simultaneously essential for them to take the physical steps. In the same way, "the journey of Israel is not simply a journey out of Egypt and toward the promised land; it is also a journey toward knowing God."[28]

3. Intertwining Identities

God often states in *Exodus* that the purpose of many of His actions is to produce the knowledge of Himself in humanity. The movement toward grasping who God is occupies a central place in the text. Underlying any questions of how this process is accomplished is the meaning of ידע, 'to know', and what it means to "know that I am YHWH".

ידע is a common Hebrew root with a wide range of meanings, including: know (in the sense of both facts and persons), learn, observe, distinguish, recognize, admit and acknowledge. An examination of context should clarify the theme of 'knowing YHWH' in *Exodus*. The first reference to knowing God is a negative one: Pharaoh says, "Who is the Lord that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go" (5:2). Here, a lack of the knowledge of God is directly related to a lack of action. God's response to this is the plagues. Prominent throughout the plague narrative is the statement that the objective of God's action is that the Egyptians will know YHWH.

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[28] Richard H. Moye, "Myth and History," *JBL* 109 (1990): 595.

There are several facets of this: to know that "I am YHWH" (7:5, 17; 14:4); that there is no one like YHWH (8:10; 9:14); that YHWH is in the midst of the land (8:22); and that the earth is the Lord's (9:29). When it is used in reference to the Egyptians, ידע certainly has the sense of 'to acknowledge or admit'. The point is that Egyptian arrogance will be broken down, and they will be forced to declare a knowledge of God by letting Israel go in obedience to Him.

Although repeated less frequently than the statements concerning the Egyptians, the Israelites are also meant to learn that YHWH is God.[29] The first use of ידע in this context is a negated one. In 6:3, God states that He did not make himself known as YHWH to the Patriarchs. This has been a puzzle in Biblical studies, as the name 'YHWH' is used in *Genesis*.[30] The statement is clarified in 6:7, however, when it is apparent that God intends to reveal himself as YHWH to the people through their deliverance and the fulfillment of the covenant (6:4-6), something that the Patriarchs did not see. 'Know' in this sense would have the flavour of 'knowing by experience'. ידע is not used again in relation to the Israelites until 10:2, in which Israel is to know that YHWH is God through their observation of the signs performed among the Egyptians -- a step back from knowledge by experience. The theme is not taken up again in exactly the same form. The closest statement is by the narrator, that the people feared YHWH

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[29] The phrase "then you will know that I am the Lord" occurs 62 times in *Ezekiel*, perhaps indicating a connection between the books. Cf Van Seters, *Moses* 47-8,74, and 93 for other possible connections to this book. Literary similarities may help with dating the book of *Exodus* and in understanding the relationship of the text to its readers.

[30] The name became the basis for the Documentary hypothesis, so that the uses of YHWH in *Genesis* were deemed a different source than this passage.

(14:31) as a result of the event at the Sea, if knowledge is to be equated with fear.[31] It appears in yet another form in chapter 15, where the Israelites declare that YHWH is God (15:2-3): apparently the experience was sufficient to generate this knowledge.

The declaration at the Sea is the far end of the process, however. The movement begins in 4:29-31, when Moses and Aaron tell the Israelites the words of God and perform the signs. In response, the people believe. The text states that they bow down and worship. This implies that they have already gained a knowledge of God. However, they reveal a lack of just such knowledge when they reject Moses and Aaron after the failed first attempt at deliverance. The foremen say to these leaders, "May the Lord look upon you and judge you!" (5:21). Like Moses, they have not *listened* to God, and so they do not *know* His purposes. Apparently, the rod, the leprosy and the water were not enough to solidify their faith in the face of the very events God planned.

3.1 Signs and Knowledge

Traditionally, the actions of God in His confrontation with Pharaoh have been called plagues, but the word has a meaning of 'signs'. The plagues are, then, prophetic signs. The plague narrative has, in the words of Van Seters, "a clear epistemic function, to lead to the knowledge of Yahweh as the real agent in the affairs of men and nations."[32] For the Israelites, these are prophetic signs of a future deliverance. These actions of God are self-fulfilling prophecies of redemption: when the sign that declares the future

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[31] Cf. 9:20.0

[32] *Moses* 92.

deliverance of Israel brings ruin upon its oppressor, then deliverance has already begun. These signs are of the same nature as the one in 3:12, in which the sign for Moses is the fulfillment of God's plan. Here, in 7-12, the portents given to the Israelites work to fulfill God's purpose.

The plagues operate as signs for the Egyptians as well -- but not of a future deliverance. For the Egyptians, the coming Passover and the events at the Red Sea are acts of judgment by God: the death of the firstborn sons and the drowning of the army are specific punishments for the genocide ordered in chapter one. For Egypt, as well, the signs fulfill their own warnings of destruction. When the plagues, which warn of future disaster, cause immediate damage, there is no room for disbelief. Yet, the whole narrative revolves around Pharaoh's refusal to release the Israelites.

God hardens Pharaoh's heart. This action of God seems to work against the declared purpose of the plagues. By hardening the man's heart, YHWH prevents him from comprehending the message of the signs. Many explanations have been given for this paradox. One solution is to view hardening in a psychological manner, in which Pharaoh's stubbornness has become his destiny. Another opinion is that in order for the full judgment of God to be executed -- a judgment which the Egyptians deserved for their 'crimes against humanity' in oppressing the Hebrews -- Pharaoh's heart had to be hardened. A kind of combination is expressed in: "after Pharaoh has repeatedly hardened his own heart, then repentance becomes impossible and God hardens Pharaoh's heart to prepare him for destruction."[33] At one extreme, God is portrayed as manipulating

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[33] Van Seters, *Moses* 90. Cf. Childs 170-175; Eslinger 56-7.

Pharaoh -- and all the human characters -- like pawns for His incomprehensible purposes. At the opposite end of the scale is the observation that 'hardening the heart' means 'making the mind dumb', so that Pharaoh becomes a comedic figure because of his stupidity -- and making the point that anyone who defies God has lost his wits. In any case, this detail serves to enforce the image of God as omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent, even in the heart and mind of man.

The plagues work to produce experiential knowledge of God in the people of Israel. Little is said about the actual effect the subsequent disasters have on the Hebrews: the narrative focus on the Egyptians steers away from any interior view of the Israelites. Beyond the view of the reader, however, the people have begun to change. Even though the continued confrontations with Pharaoh have not met with any more success than the initial one -- and in fact have now resulted in death threats -- the people choose to follow the leadership of Moses. They now understand God's plan of action (after it is nearly complete!) and are willing to trust Him to complete the deliverance.

3.2 Ritual and Identity

The insertion of the Passover and Massot festivals at this point, as well as the rites of the firstborn, place them as primary to national identity. The main difficulty with these passages, however, is that their non-narrative nature seems potentially to make some or all of the instructions secondary and additional to the story (as it might be construed in terms of saga or folktale).[34] While these issues could lead to a historical examination of

the development of Israelite identity through subsequent additions of rituals, I do not wish to pursue such a course at this point. Rather, continuing to focus upon the received form of the text, I will examine the structure of word and action which was introduced in the Bloody-Bridegroom episode.[35]

I have already mentioned Shankman's discussion of 4:24-26. In this incident, God declared His word to Moses in the call narrative, defining Himself through the power of His speech. Yet Moses required experiential knowledge before he could internalize God's word. God acted upon the flesh, seeking to kill Moses. Zipporah responded with the circumcision, which signifies covenant. The ritual "explains God's personal relationship to His firstborn, Israel".[36] However, the action was incomplete until Zipporah proclaimed it: "The act occurs only when the word establishes the fact of its occurrence".[37]

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[34] To say that the theories about the origins of these rituals are numerous is an understatement. I will only give some brief examples below.

Blenkinsopp (155-157) presents a typical source-oriented view, dividing the rituals into early (12:21-27) with P expansions in 12:1-20. The consecration of the firstborn (13:1-2, 11-16) and the Unleavened bread were added by D.

Goldstein and Cooper approach the problem through a history of the festivals in the Pentateuch, building as many scholars do on the ideas of Wellhausen. They divide the rituals into parts originating in the North (*massot*) or in Judah (*pesah*), and account also for Babylonian and Canaanite influences. A process of the consolidation of the traditions then occurred, with Northern imposed on Judah, followed by a later revision to restore authentic Judean tradition. ("The Festivals of Israel and Judah and the Literary History of the Pentateuch," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 110.1 (1990): 19-35). See also Childs 178-214.

Turning again to Van Seters, *Moses* has an extensive discussion which closely examines the major hypotheses in the field (113-127). Van Seters' conclusion is that the whole of 12:1-28 is a P supplement, as well as 12:40-50. J includes *massot*, 13:3-16, making the Exodus narrative closely tied to the festival of Unleavened Bread and the law of firstlings. The Passover was added to the text later (Van Seters considers it to be a newly created festival when P adds it in).

[35] Shankman notes that 4:23 begs a comparison with the tenth plague, although his purposes run in the opposition direction (plague to bridegroom rather than bridegroom to plague).

[36] 175.

[37] 176.

Altogether, the narrative moved from word to action to word, the entirety of the movement being needed for the symbolic action/power.

The structure which Shankman observes in 4:24-26 is also apparent in the tenth plague passage, including both the narrative and the exposition of the rituals. God first gives the announcement of deliverance (11:1-8) and the instructions to the Israelites for averting the plague (12:1-27).[38] Then the threat of death is actualized at midnight. Finally, the ritual response solidifies experience into a component of identity. This shared structure is on a different level than the symbolism common to the bridegroom incident and the last plague. While elements such as the blood of Gershom and the paschal sacrifice correspond to one another symbolically and intensify typology in the overall narrative, the structural pattern is the true vehicle for the transformation of identity.

The inclusion of the rituals allows the text to act more directly than narrative alone would in generating national identity. By first establishing social institutions within the story, and also drawing the reader into the narrative through association with personal experience, the text itself forms part of the national identity. Not only are national celebrations instigated, but the narrative which surrounds them forms an etiology for the rituals. This reinforces the place of the ceremony in Israel's history and world-view structure. Without the narrative, there is only a vague explanation to accompany the formal actions; without the ritual, the narrative is reduced to story, however powerful.

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[38] 12:1-27 includes instructions for both Passover and Massot as rituals, as well as Moses' relation of the immediate instructions to the people (12:21-23). Discussions of the history of this text may be found in Van Seters, *Moses* 113-127; Thompson, *Origin* 144; Blenkinsopp 155-157. Thompson also discusses a possible historical milieu for the development of the tradition as a whole in the chapter "The Intellectual Matrix of Biblical Tradition" in *Early History*.

An important factor in this is the involvement of the ancient reader in the text. The most evident connection of the reader to the events in the story is the presence of the rituals. Continuation of the traditions is a component of the ritual itself: "And when your *children* ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them..." (12:26-27). An Israelite would have read himself as part of the chain, and the story as a heritage passed on until it finally reached his own generation.[39] This declaration of the events (meaning the narrative) acts as a vehicle for transforming the triumphs of the story into experience in the *reader's* life, reinforced by his participation in the Passover and rituals of the Firstlings.

At the same time, if the narrative were read in times of oppression or captivity, it could have had the effect of the initial announcement of deliverance. This type of reading would be strengthened by interactions of the text with Prophetic writings concerning deliverance, which does seem to have been the case.[40] The Exodus narrative, then, stands as a type of sign or prophecy for the action of God in freeing the people of Israel from oppression. It would be fulfilled in conjunction with the words of the prophets in the

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[39] The desire to promote this kind of attitude is evident when the book of the law is discovered during the rule of Josiah (II Kings 22:8). Even though the immediate fathers of Israel had not preserved the tradition, it was a heritage passed on from the ancestors. II Kings 23:21-23 records that the Passover was celebrated for the first time after a long hiatus, a record of the re-introduction (or, introduction, depending on one's constructed history of the text. Cf. Thompson, *Early History* 415-423) of tradition as identity, as the story of *Exodus* may have been.

[40] Van Seters, *Moses*, deals extensively with this. A specific example is his examination of the revelation of the name of YHWH (3:13-15) as resting upon Ezekiel 20:5-6. The Ezekiel passage relates the Exodus directly to the judgment of Israel (captivity) and later restoration. If the great part of *Exodus* were composed during the exile, as Van Seters suggests, then interest in the text most certainly was related to the desire of the Israelites for a release similar to that of the Exodus. The readings of liberation theology support the power of the text in this sense.

same way as the plagues in the narrative were signs for the final deliverance from Egypt. In this way, the story takes a dynamic role in the identity -- and hopes -- of the nation.

The end result is that through the integration of word and experience, the people gain knowledge of God and identities are formed. God's word gives meaning to the events of the narrative; the narrative itself is a word to the reader which gives meaning to events in the nation. The response of the rituals -- the re-telling of events and passing on of traditions -- translates the experience into word, or reality, on the level of national self-image. As I move into a discussion of the event at the Sea, so the story also continues in its integration of words and action.

3.3 Mythic Integration at the Sea

Most studies of the Red Sea Passage maintain that it is a transitional segment between the plague narratives and the wilderness tradition. The story contains elements from the narratives both preceding and following it, so that much discussion concerns the origin of the Red Sea -- whether it belongs to the plagues or the wilderness. Van Seters points out the underlying assumption of both of these positions:

> A basic difficulty with the approach of Coats and Childs...is to suppose that the stories of the plagues, the exodus, and the wilderness existed as distinct traditions in which one could locate the sea motif. If one does not accept the premise that every element and motif in the J or P story stems from ancient oral tradition then the discussion becomes somewhat pointless.[41]

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[41] *Moses*, 140.

Instead of considering hypothetical strands of tradition, Van Seters considers literary relationships between the Red Sea narrative and other places in the Scripture. Specifically, he examines the holy war theme of the Deuteronomist (Josh. 10:6-11; 1 Sam 7:7ff)[42] and the crossing of the Jordan (Josh. 3-4).[43] These comparisons result in an important change of focus. Despite its apparently transitional position between the plague and the Sinai narratives, the narrative of the Red Sea is not transitional in nature. This is evident when it is compared with Exod. 2:11-22 or 4:18-28, passages whose primary purpose is to move Moses from Egypt to Midian and back. This passage tells of the powerful, direct action of God,[44] so that the movement becomes incidental to the event. Perhaps the best comparison here is to a movie in which the viewers believe that the story is over, and a denouement appears to begin, but suddenly the villain reappears.[45] Rather than filling a transitional role, the return of Pharaoh intensifies the narrative to mythic proportions.

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[42] Van Seters, *Moses* 134-137.

[43] Van Seters, *Moses* 141-145. In the Jordan crossing, Van Seters describes a process of borrowing and revision in which the Yahwist used the passage in Joshua as a source, but then also revised the source to make the connection absolutely clear.

[44] The description of the events is dramatic and visual. One example of this is in the portrayal of the approaching Egyptians. First, they are called simply Egyptians, then chariots, and finally a whole army. This is what the Israelites would have seen as they stood on the shores of the sea. The cloud of dust and movement coming from the land they are leaving signals that this is a large group of Egyptians. Then the chariots, driving ahead with the officers, become visible. Finally, the whole Egyptian army is spread out and advancing -- and drowned. These shifts serve also to increase the danger level, and so increase the status of the victory.

[45] A recent example of this is the popular movie *Speed*. It is the story of a mad bomber who commits terrorist acts in hope of getting ransom. He plants a bomb on a bus, and the hero, a 'good cop' must try to save the passengers. All the passengers escape, and the hero, with his lady, dramatically avoids death -- and the romantic music begins. However, the bomber is still at large. He takes the lady hostage, and a fast-paced climax on a run-away subway car ensues. Finally, the villain is killed by the hero.

The connection between the deliverance at the sea account and creation stories of the defeat of the chaos monster has been noted by several scholars.[46] Van Seters points out specific passages in *Isaiah* which draw them together: Isaiah 43:16-17 and 51:9-11. The first passage is similar to the J material in the Red Sea narrative, while the second one appears to have been historicized by P in his supplements.[47] These connections establish the presence of the mythic elements in the text and entail important narrative consequences.

Bernard Batto, in *Slaying the Dragon*, presents this mythical content as fundamental to the Genesis and Exodus narratives. He postulates that the deliverance at the Red Sea is closely tied to the creation stories:

> The genius of the Priestly Writer was thus to posit two creations. Or more correctly, he rewrote the creation story to contain two acts. The first secured the foundation of the cosmos and humankind in general; the second, the foundation of God's people. The first he inherited from the cultural matrix of the ancient Near East, the second from the Yahwistic faith of Israel...
> In the second act of creation Yahweh went on to found his people Israel as his covenanted people and establish his "resting place" -- the place from which he rules the cosmos -- in their midst. Act two is told in the book of *Exodus*. From P's perspective the exodus, no less than the creation in *Genesis*, is an "event" of cosmic proportions, a story of origins through which the cosmic order is established and actualized. Israel can never be just one of the nations. It was specially created to be the dwelling place on earth of the very Lord of

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[46] Childs 223; Northrop Frye, *The Great Code* (Toronto: Academic Press, 1982) 188-190; Van Seters, *Moses* 145-146; Bernard Batto, *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition* (Louisville: John Knox, 1992) 102-152.

[47] *Moses* 145-146. He uses these passages as textual evidence for his theory of development of the text, placing 2nd *Isaiah* between J and P.

> heaven and earth. Its story is bound up in some essential way with the myth of creation.[48]

In one version of the creation story in the ancient near east, the god defeats the chaos monster and saves mankind. When these terms are applied to *Exodus*, Pharaoh is the figure who opposes YHWH, and so the Egyptian king becomes an embodiment of chaos[49]. He gives orders which lead to murdering babies and ruthlessly increasing the burden on slaves. Above all, he challenges the authority of God, thwarting His purposes and trying to eliminate the Israelites. The creation theme is thus established in the story from the beginning.

Ultimately, the chaos monster is destroyed. This operates on a symbolic level at the Red Sea. The chaos monster is usually associated with the sea, so that when God splits the sea, he is wounding the monster. The connection to Pharaoh is enforced when it is the king and his forces who are killed and whose bodies are seen by the Israelites (14:28,30).

This event accomplishes two purposes. First, the origin of the nation is tied to the primordial origin of the world[50] and through this increased depth the identity of the nation gains a deeper grounding and solidity. Second, the battle of the sea is historicized into the real past of the people. An ancient myth is actualized in such a way as to assert the singularity and sovereignty of YHWH in "real history".

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[48] Batto 119-20.

[49] Frye notes that Pharaoh and Egypt are associated with Rahab, the chaos monster and the dragon of the seas, in *Isaiah, Ezekiel* and *Psalms* (188-190). Fretheim's article "Ecological Signs" examines the development of this image in *Exodus*.

[50] Batto 119-20.

On another level, crossing the Red Sea symbolizes the birth of the people. Moses is carried safely over the water in a papyrus ark in his birth story; likewise, the Israelites cross the Reed Sea on dry land.[51] The people have become YHWH's firstborn, just as He declared in 4:22. Israel is born, or created, by no act of their own. God receives the credit. As they acknowledge YHWH at the Sea, He becomes the center of their identity. This indicates a convergence of the viewpoints of God and the people.

This shared viewpoint is a product of the entire movement of chapters 1-14. The Israelite self-image in Egypt had rested upon their image in the eyes of the Egyptians: they were foreigners, the underdog, and the slave. When the army appears on the horizon, the old identity re-asserts itself. This image is opposed throughout the narrative by YHWH's view of the people: they are His firstborn and a people chosen by the dynamic God who acts for them. These pictures form opposite ends of the scale, and for the people to wholly adopt the identity YHWH has in mind, their reliance on the Egyptian view must be destroyed. The signs and even the death of the firstborn have not accomplished the needed transformation. It is the Red Sea event which is the turning point. Suddenly, the people are confronted with an Other greater than the Egyptians upon whom to construct their subjectivity as a nation.[52] They become the people of God.

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[51] The Birth story, too, can be tied to creation. Moses' mother "saw that he was good" (2:2), harkening to God's observation that creation was good (Genesis 1 -- although the usual attribution of Exodus 2:2 to J and Genesis 1 to P make this more problematic).

[52] The writing of Julia Kristeva (as well as other psychoanalysts) deals especially with identity boundaries and foreigners. The Egyptian responses to the Hebrews are much like the attitudes of nationals toward immigrants in *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), although it must be kept in mind that the modern and ancient concepts of "nation" are quite diverse. In fact, she has some discussion of the Biblical identity of Israelites in *Strangers*. Two useful articles on her work are "Abject Strangers" by Noelle McAfee and "National Abjects" by Norma Moruzzi (the second

3.4 Identity Proclaimed

The newly formed identity is expressed in the Song by the Sea (15:1-22). The Song functions in much the same manner as the Passover and Massot rituals (above). It seems to occupy a liturgical place in the narrative, which is reinforced by the response of Miriam and the women (15:20-21).[53] Thus, while the Song is depicted in the story as a spontaneous response to the event at the Sea, it is also a formalized version of the story. It is through this combination that the promise becomes knowledge for the Israelites: action is presented in word at precisely the right moment and in just the right manner so as to etch it into the national world view.

Examination of the Song starts with the brief introductory phrase which precedes the hymn itself. Chapter 15 begins with אָז, generally translated 'then' or 'at that time'.

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being more critical of Kristeva's stance), both in Kelly Oliver, *Ethics, Politics and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[53] The Song of the Sea has been the focus of a great deal of discussion. Every aspect of its inclusion in the narrative is scrutinized (the opinion that it is an addition is nearly the only thing agreed upon by scholars). The dating of the Song as later than the final form of the prose narrative was disputed by Albright at the beginning of the century. The idea that the poem was an ancient composition (due to the conviction that poetry is older than prose) caught the imagination of scholars through the middle of this century (see especially Cross, Freedman and Childs). More recent studies of content, vocabulary and comparative work with the *Psalms* have caused scholarship in general to return to the view that the Song is from around the time of the Priestly writer (Van Seters, *Moses* 147-8, and Blenkinsopp 158-160, give summaries of the positions).

The structure of the Song is also disputed. Van Seters views it as a "highly eclectic poem with lines drawn from a variety of hymns" (*Moses* 147). Other scholars view it as a tightly constructed unit (Childs 245-48; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985) 50-54). Added to this is the issue of the place of Miriam's song: is it the title (albeit a long one), or the refrain -- or the original version of the entire song? (Cf. J. Gerald Janzen, "Song of Moses, Song of Miriam: Who is Seconding Whom?" *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 54 (1992): 211-20).

I do not wish to enter into a lengthy discussion of these issues. Rather, my consideration of these verses will be limited to the content of the Song as it relates to presentation of the characters in the final version.

The singing is directly related to the events of chapter 14, and becomes an extension of the prose narrative. "At that time, Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord," (15:1a) is the full transitional phrase which leads into the Song. This defines who is singing, and so whose character can be discerned from the words -- as Watts observes, "A quotation always characterizes the person(s) in whose mouth(s) it appears."[54]

Israel sings praise in response to specific acts of God, directing attention towards Him, yet in their words the worshippers reveal themselves. For the purposes of examining Israelite identity, the Song may be divided into three sections.[55] 15:1b-5 recounts God's actions and personalizes Him in the lives of the Israelites. The second section, 15:6-12, repeats the account of the Red Sea event, but with a different perspective. The last verses shift from the events at hand to the future conquest of the land and the rule of YHWH as King (15:13-18). Each of these segments further establishes the identity of Israel as it has been transformed by the defeat of Pharaoh, and so I will proceed through them in more detail.

The first section consists of worship of God both in compact, straight-forward accounts of His action at the Sea and in non-narrative personal application of what the event reveals. It is this second component, personal application, which is central to understanding the new identity. It comes to the forefront through the first-person pronouns in the verses. As the Israelites speak in the 'I', they make the knowledge of God personal: *my* strength and my might.[56] Even more, they say, "He is *my* God [אֵלִי],

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[54] James W. Watts, *Psalm and Story: Inset Hymns in Hebrew Narrative* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992) 51.

[55] Divisions of the hymn range from two parts to four, depending on the scholar's objectives.

and I will praise him; my father's God and I will exalt him" (15:2, emphasis mine). This is a progression in the image of God. Through *Exodus*, a stress has been placed upon YHWH as the 'God of the Patriarchs' -- of the fathers. The closest to personal identification with God was in the call narrative, where God identified himself as the 'God of *your* father' (3:6). In 15:2-3, God is claimed as immediate, the God of the Israelites here and now. Supplementing this is the phrase, "the Lord is his name" (15:3), which ties in again the uniqueness of God, revealed through His action for these people -- except that "I am/I will be..." is now the God who *has* acted, and he is known by the action (15:4-5). He is the warrior, or champion, who has delivered the people in an unmistakable display of power. God is addressed in the third person in the act of defining who He is for the one(s) speaking.

There is a shift from 'he' to 'you' in the pronoun referring to God in the second part of the poem. Here, as the picture of God is formed, the people enter into an utterance directed specifically to Him. As in the story of the plagues, the action occurs between the Egyptians, not the Israelites, and YHWH. The perspective has changed, however, as 'they' are discussed in terms of 'You'. The competition between the two viewpoints, YHWH's and Pharaoh's, has been resolved, and Israel is now focused in the direction of God. The singers are always present in the song, so that 'enemies' refers to the enemies of the people (now polarized to the side of YHWH), and praise for God's action means praise for action that benefited of the speaking Israelites.

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[56] Michael Barre, "'My Strength and My Song' in Exodus 15:2," *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 54 (1992) 623-37, discusses the translation of זִמְרָת (15:2). After comparisons with other Biblical usages and with related roots in other Semitic languages, he suggests that the meaning is 'vigor', and that the phrase 'my strength and my vigor' means 'my guardian deity' in this context (637).

God's view of the people and His resulting action are the subjects of the final section. "You" continues to be the pronoun used for God, but now the people are referred to in the third person. They are the object of YHWH's attention. He has redeemed them and will continue to fulfill His promises. Verse 13 describes חֶסֶד towards the people, manifested in establishing them as a nation. The concept of Israel as a political entity among the nations is not the focus of the verses, however. As Childs notes, "The poem does not end by defining Israel's role in the land, but rather by reflection of Israel's function as the worshipping community"[57] -- and, it should be added, with the image of YHWH as eternal king. While the promised land is the ultimate goal of the departure from Egypt, and the concept of a land of their own motivates the slaves to begin a change, the land -- at this point -- is less of a factor in the transformation of the Israelites than the identification of YHWH as their God.

The perspective of the final section of the Song makes it clear that the encounter with God at the Red Sea has become foundational for the world view of Israel. This telling of the events by the people in chapter fifteen translates an awesome experience into a paradigm for self-definition. In their words, the people reveal what God's action means to them and what its impact on their identity is: they have been reoriented in their view of themselves, now seeing themselves as a chosen people rather than as slaves.

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[57] Childs 252

3.5 Identity Read

The narrative of the event at the Sea continues after the Song until verse 22. This is the closing bracket for the hymn. Verse 19 "re-establish[es] the temporal and physical setting"[58]. This is necessary for two reasons. First, it contributes to the task of historicizing the mythological elements at the Red Sea. Because poetry appears to have been the common medium for the transmission of myth in the ancient near east, the inclusion of the poem could sway the narrative dangerously close to this kind of status -- something that biblical writers avoided. The summary of the event entrenches the hymn in 'reality'. Second, the verse provides a transition to Miriam's part in the Song. The repetition of the event, followed by a description of the action of the worshippers (15:21) makes the scene more vivid. These concluding verses reinforce the Song as part of the narrative, not just a formula for future liturgy or an alternative version of the events.

De-mythologizing and embedding the Song in the narrative affects both the way in which the story is read and the characterization of the Israelites in the text. It would allow the ancient reader/hearer to identity more closely with the characters because they are ordinary people (as opposed to epic heroes) in a world comparable to the reality outside the story. The textual world is not one which deals solely with the interactions of gods and superhuman figures, as is generally the case with ancient epics, but rather one which concerns itself with ordinary people -- albeit in extraordinary circumstances. While

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[58] Watts 45.

many today dispute that the event that occurred at the Red Sea could happen in 'reality', the Weltanschuung dominant 2500 years ago was less 'scientific' and more easily allowed for such things[59]. The effect of the Song would be amplified by the inclusion of the Conquest of the land, making the event at the Sea operate for the ancient reader on the same level as known fact. To consider one potential time frame only, if the story were read following the Babylonian exile, when the people have returned to Israel and are attempting to reconstruct a society, the Song could easily be construed as their own story. They, too, had been held captive in a land not their own, they had been released in accordance with prophecies and were building the nation in the face of opposition. It would bring out the sense of history repeating itself. Each of the rituals in the story would have an increased significance when seen as affirming an identity nearly lost, yet grounded not only in cosmic origins, but in two historical events (the Exodus and the Return from Exile).

Exodus is written to present the original birth of the nation, yet it would function to generate the identity of the people as they read it. In the narrative, the events are foretold to give the action meaning, then the action itself is recited, and finally the characters convert the experience into world-view. As the text was read, it would draw the reader into the same process through identification with the characters. The combination of story, ritual, myth and poetry in *Exodus* powerfully accomplishes this: the evidence is that after thousands of years it is still effective.

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[59] I do not intend a value judgment in this remark. If anything, my opinion is that we have traded more for science than we can afford.

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